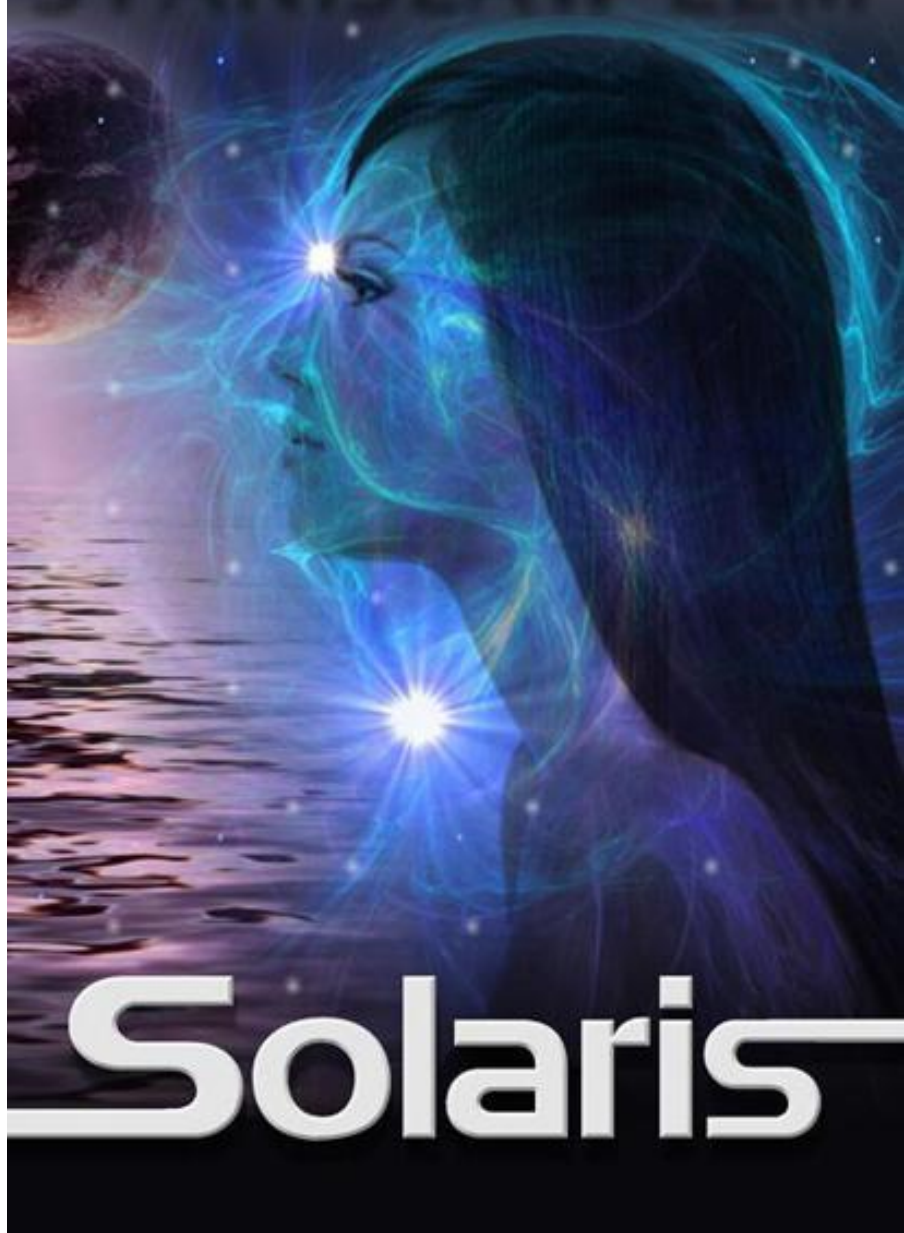




STANISLAW LEM

Solaris

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SOLARIS

Stanisław Lem

translated by Bill Johnston

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At nineteen hundred hours ship's time I climbed down the metal ladder past the bays on either side into the capsule. Inside, there was just enough room to raise my elbows. After I attached the end of the cables into the port jutting from the side of the capsule, my space suit filled with air and from that point on I couldn't make the slightest movement. I stood, or rather hung suspended, in a bed of air, all of one piece with my metal shell.

Raising my eyes through the convex porthole I could see the walls of the bay and, higher up, leaning in, Moddard's face. It quickly disappeared and everything went dark as the heavy protective cone was put in place from above. I heard the eight-times-repeated whirr of the electric motors tightening the screws. Then the hiss of air entering the shock absorbers. My eyes were getting used to the dark. I could already make out the pale green shape of the only gauge.

"Ready, Kelvin?" I heard in my headset.

"Ready, Moddard," I replied.

"Don't worry about a thing. The Station'll bring you in," he said. "Bon voyage!"

Before I could answer, there was a rasping sound overhead and the capsule shook. I tensed my muscles instinctively, but nothing else happened.

"When do I take off?" I asked, hearing a rustling noise like fine grains of sand falling on a diaphragm.

"You're already in flight, Kelvin. Be well!" came Moddard's voice in my ear. Before I believed it, a broad gap opened up in front of my face, through which I could see stars. I tried in vain to spot Alpha Aquarii, towards which the *Prometheus* was now headed. The sky in this part of the Galaxy meant nothing to me; I didn't know a single constellation, and all I saw through the porthole was glittering dust. I waited for the stars to start smoking. I didn't get to see it. They merely began to fade and disappear, dissolving against a reddening background. I realized I was in the upper strata of the atmosphere. Stiff in my cocoon of pneumatic cushions, all I could do was look straight ahead. There was still no horizon. I flew on, not feeling any movement, but slowly and insidiously my body grew hotter and hotter. Outside there arose a soft penetrating twitter like the sound of metal against wet glass. If it weren't for the numbers flashing on the gauge I wouldn't have been aware of the speed of my descent. The stars were gone. The porthole was filled with a ruddy-colored brightness. I could hear the heavy beat of my own pulse. My face

burned; on my neck I felt cold blowing from the air conditioning. I regretted not having managed to see the *Prometheus*—it must have been out of sight by the time the porthole automatically opened.

The capsule shuddered once and twice, vibrated in a disagreeable way; the shaking passed through all the layers of insulation and cushions and entered deep into my body. The green face of the gauge grew hazy. I stared at it without being afraid. I hadn't come all this way only to perish at my destination.

"Come in, Solaris Station," I said. "Solaris Station. Solaris Station! You need to do something. I think I'm destabilizing. Solaris Station, this is newcomer. Over."

And once again I'd missed the crucial moment when the planet came into view. It extended vast and flat; from the size of the streaks on its surface I could tell I was still a long way off. Or rather, a long way up, since I'd already passed that intangible boundary where distance from a celestial body becomes altitude. I was descending. Still descending. I could feel it now, even when I closed my eyes. I opened them at once, because I wanted to see as much as possible.

I waited out a minute or so of silence then called again. I received no response this time either. Crackling volleys of static repeated in my headphones, against the background of a hum so deep and low it seemed to be the voice of the planet itself. The orange sky in the spy hole covered over with a film. The glass darkened; I flinched involuntarily, insofar as the pneumatic swathes permitted it. Then, a moment later, I realized these were clouds. A whole host of them moved abruptly upwards as if blown. I was still flying, now in sunlight, now in shadow, because the capsule was turning on its vertical axis and the huge, swollen-looking face of the sun was passing smoothly across my eyes, appearing on the left and setting on the right. All at once, through the crackle and the hum, a distant voice began talking right in my ear:

"Solaris Station to newcomer, Solaris Station to newcomer. AOK. Newcomer is under control of the Station. Solaris Station to newcomer, prepare for docking at zero hour. Attention, commencing countdown. Two hundred fifty, two hundred forty-nine, two hundred forty-eight. . ."

The individual words were separated by split-second mewing noises that showed it was not a human talking. That was strange, to say the least. Usually, every living soul would run to the docking bay when someone new was arriving, especially someone directly from Earth. I didn't have time to think about it, however, because the huge circle that the sun had been turning around me stood on end along with the plain towards which I was dropping. After this movement

there came another in the opposite direction; I was rocking like the bob of a huge pendulum, fighting back dizziness. Against the expanse of the planet rising vertically like a wall, striped with dirty lilac-colored and blackish streaks, I spotted a fine checkerboard of white and green dots that marked the location of the Station. At the same time, something detached with a snap from the exterior of the capsule—the long necklace of an annular parachute, which flapped abruptly. In this noise there was something unutterably terrestrial—after so many months, the first real sound of wind.

Everything began to happen very quickly. Up till now I'd only known that I was falling. Now I could see it. The white-and-green checkerboard was getting rapidly bigger. I could already see it was painted on an elongated, whale-shaped hull glistening silver, with the needles of radio antenna protruding from its sides, and rows of darker window openings; this metal colossus wasn't resting on the surface of the planet but was suspended above it, its shadow moving across an inky background in the form of an elliptical patch of even more intense blackness. Simultaneously I noticed the violet-flushed furrows of the ocean, which betrayed a faint motion; the clouds suddenly rose high up, their edges marked with dazzling crimson, the sky between them grew distant and flat, dull orange in color, and everything became blurred: I'd entered a spin. Before I could utter a word, a brief impact returned the capsule to a horizontal position, and the ocean, glittering with a mercuric light to the very limits of the horizon, appeared in the spy hole. The droning cords and rings of the parachute suddenly detached and flew off over the waves, carried by the wind; the capsule rocked softly with that particular slowed-down motion characteristic of an artificial force field, and moved downward. The last thing I was able to see were lattice work flight catapults and the grids of two radio telescope dishes that looked to be several stories high. Something immobilized the capsule with a terrifying noise of steel striking firmly against steel. Something opened up beneath me, and the metal shell in which I'd been rigidly encased ended its hundred-and-ten mile journey with a prolonged wheezing sigh.

"Solaris Station. Zero and zero. Docking complete. Over and out," came the lifeless voice of the control mechanism. With both hands (I could sense a vague pressure on my chest, and my innards felt like an irksome burden) I took hold of the grips directly opposite my shoulders and disconnected the cables. A green sign reading EARTH came on, and the side of the capsule opened. The pneumatic berth pushed me gently in the back, so that in order not to stumble I had to take a step forward.

With a soft hiss like a resigned sigh the air left the coils of the

space suit. I was free.

I stood beneath a silver funnel high as a nave. Bundles of colored pipes led down the walls, disappearing into circular wells. I turned around. The ventilation shafts were roaring, drawing in what was left of the poisonous atmosphere of the planet that had gotten in during the docking. The cigar of the capsule, empty as a burst cocoon, stood in a concavity set into a steel platform. Its external plating had been scorched to a dirty brown color. I walked down the short ramp. Beyond it, a layer of rough plastic had been welded to the metal deck. It had worn away in places from the wheels of the mobile rocket jacks. The air conditioning compressors suddenly went off and there was complete silence. I looked around somewhat helplessly; I'd expected someone to appear, but nobody had come. There was nothing but a glowing neon arrow indicating a soundless moving walkway. I stepped onto it. The ceiling of the hangar curved down in an elegant parabola that became the tube of a corridor. In its alcoves there were heaps of pressurized gas cylinders, containers, annular parachutes, crates, all in disorderly piles, any old how. That made me think, too. The walkway ended at a point where the corridor widened into a circular space. Here there was an even bigger jumble. Under a mound of metal canisters an oily fluid had leaked and formed a puddle. A strong, unpleasant odor filled the air. Boot prints marked clearly in the sticky substance led in different directions. Among the cans lay rolls of white telegraph tape, torn papers, and trash, all of which looked as if it had been swept out of the cabins. And there was another illuminated sign directing me to the middle door. It led to a corridor so narrow that two people could barely have passed one another. Light came from high-placed windows with biconvex panes directed at the sky. There was another door, painted with a green-and-white checkerboard. It was ajar. I entered. The semi-spherical cabin had one large panoramic window in which the mist-covered sky was aglow. Down below, the blackish hills of the waves moved soundlessly. There were numerous open cabinets around the walls. They were filled with technical instruments, books, glasses with a dried residue at the bottom, dust-covered thermos flasks. Around the dirty floor there were five or six mechanical tables on wheels, and among them several armchairs that were deflated and sagging. Only one was blown up, its backrest leaning to the rear. In it sat a small, scrawny man with a sunburned face. The skin was peeling from his nose and cheekbones. I knew who he was. It was Snaut, Gibarian's second-in-command, a cybernetician. In his time he'd published a number of highly original articles in the *Journal of Solaristics*. I'd never met him in person before. He was wearing a mesh shirt, tufts of gray hair on his flat chest poking through, and once white linen pants with multiple pockets like a

mechanic's, stained at the knees and burned from reagents. He was holding a plastic bulb of the kind used to drink out of on ships that lack artificial gravity. He looked at me as if he'd been dazzled by a blinding light. The bulb fell from his fingers as they unclenched, and bounced a couple of times on the floor like a ball. A splash of clear liquid spilled from it. The blood drained slowly from his face. I was too taken aback to say anything, and this wordless scene continued until in some mysterious way his fear was transferred to me. I took a step forward. He shrank into his armchair.

"Snaut," I whispered. He winced as if he'd been struck. Staring at me with inexpressible aversion, he said hoarsely:

"I don't know you, I don't know you, what do you want. . . ?"

The spilled liquid evaporated quickly. I caught the smell of alcohol. Was he drinking? Drunk? But why was he so afraid? I was still standing in the middle of the cabin. My knees were wobbly, and my ears felt like they'd been stopped up with cotton wool. The pressure of the floor beneath my feet still didn't seem entirely reliable. Outside the convex window the ocean was moving evenly. Snaut kept his bloodshot eyes on me. The fear was leaving his face, but the unutterable disgust remained.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked in a murmur. "Are you sick?"

"You're concerned. . . ," he said in a hollow voice. "Aha. So you're going to be concerned? But why about me? I don't know you."

"Where's Gibarian?" I asked. For a moment he held his breath, his eyes glassed over, something lit up in them and went out again.

"Gib. . . Gibar. . . no! no!!"

He shook with soundless, idiotic laughter, then abruptly fell silent.

"You've come to see Gibarian. . . ?" he said almost calmly. "Gibarian? What do you mean to do with him?"

He was looking at me as if all at once I'd ceased to be a threat to him; in his words, and even more in their tone, there was something hateful and offensive.

"What are you talking about," I stammered, feeling dazed. "Where is he?"

He was stunned.

"You don't know. . . ?"

He's drunk, I thought to myself. Drunk to the point of unconsciousness. I was growing increasingly angry. I really ought to have left, but I ran out of patience.

"Get a grip on yourself!" I roared. "How am I supposed to know when I just flew in a moment ago! What's the matter with you,

Snaut!!”

His jaw dropped. Once again he held his breath for a second, but in a different way, and a sudden glint appeared in his eye. He gripped the armrests of the chair with trembling hands and stood up with difficulty, his joints cracking.

“What?” he said, almost soberly. “You flew in? From where?”

“From Earth,” I replied, furious. “Maybe you’ve heard of it? Though it doesn’t look that way!”

“From Ear. . . Good grief. . . So you’re. . . Kelvin?!”

“That’s right. Why are you looking at me that way? What’s strange about that?”

“Nothing,” he said, blinking rapidly. “Nothing.”

He wiped his forehead.

“Kelvin, I’m sorry, it’s nothing, you know, just the surprise. I wasn’t expecting you.”

“What do you mean, you weren’t expecting me? You were informed months ago, and Moddard telegraphed today, from the *Prometheus*. . .”

“Right. Right. . . No doubt. It’s just that here, as you can see, there’s a certain amount of. . . confusion.”

“No kidding,” I retorted drily. “It’s hard not to notice.”

Snaut walked around me as if he wanted to check out the look of my space suit, which was the most ordinary kind, with its harness of pipes and cables on the chest. He gave a series of coughs. He rubbed his bony nose.

“Maybe you’d like to take a shower. . . ? It’ll do you good. It’s the blue door across the way.”

“Thanks. I know the layout of the Station.”

“Are you hungry maybe. . . ?”

“No. Where’s Gibarian?”

He went up to the window as if he hadn’t heard my question. With his back turned he looked much older. His close-cut hair was gray; the back of his neck, burned by the sun, was crisscrossed with wrinkles deep as cuts. Outside the window the crests of the waves glistened, rising and falling so slowly it seemed as if the ocean was congealing. Looking down there I had the impression the Station was moving imperceptibly sideways, as if it were slipping off an invisible base. Then it returned to equilibrium and tipped lazily in the other direction. But it was probably an illusion. Stretches of slimy foam the color of bone were gathering in the troughs between the waves. For a split second I felt a twinge of nausea in the pit of my stomach. The cold orderliness of the *Prometheus* now seemed to me something

precious and irrevocably lost.

"Listen," Snaut said unexpectedly. "For the moment it's just me. . ." He turned around and rubbed his hands nervously. "You'll have to be content with my company. For now. Call me Rat. You only know me from photographs, but it doesn't matter, everyone uses that name. Nothing to be done about it, I'm afraid. Besides, when you have parents with such cosmic aspirations as mine, even Rat starts to sound OK. . ."

"Where's Gibarian?" I asked again insistently. He blinked.

"I'm sorry I greeted you like that. It's. . . not entirely my fault. I'd completely forgotten, there's been a lot going on here, you know. . ."

"All right," I replied. "Never mind that. So what's with Gibarian? Is he not on the Station? Did he fly somewhere?"

"No," came the answer. He looked into the corner of the cabin, which was hidden behind a pile of coiled cables. "He didn't fly anywhere. And he's not going to. Precisely because of that. . . among other things. . ."

"What?" I asked. My ears were still blocked and I had the feeling I wasn't hearing right. "What's that supposed to mean? Where is he?"

"Come on, you know," he said in a completely different tone of voice. He looked me in the eye so coldly it gave me gooseflesh. He may have been drunk, but he knew what he was saying.

"Surely he's not. . . ?"

"Yes."

"An accident?"

He nodded. He wasn't just confirming, he was also sanctioning my reaction.

"When?"

"Today, at dawn."

Strange to relate, I didn't feel shock. This entire short exchange of monosyllabic question and answer rather calmed me by its matter-of-factness. I felt I now understood his previously unaccountable behavior.

"How?"

"Go get changed, settle in and come back here in, let's say, an hour."

I hesitated a moment.

"Fine."

"Wait," he said, as I was turning to the door. He gave me a peculiar look. I could see that what he wanted to say stuck in his throat.

"There were three of us and now, with you, there are three again. Do you know Sartorius?"

"Like I know you, from pictures."

"He's in the lab upstairs. I doubt he'll come out before nightfall, but. . . in any case you'll recognize him. If you should see anyone else, you understand, not me or Sartorius, you understand, then. . ."

"Then what?"

I wasn't sure if I was dreaming. Against the background of the black waves glinting bloodily in the low sun, he sat back in the armchair, his head drooping as before, and stared to the side, at the reels of cable.

"Then. . . don't do anything."

"Who might I see? A ghost?" I exclaimed.

"I get it. You think I've gone crazy. No. I haven't gone crazy. I don't know any other way to tell you. . . for the moment. Besides. . . maybe nothing'll happen. In any case, remember. You've been warned."

"About what?! What are you on about?"

"Stay calm," he persisted. "Act as if. . . Be prepared for anything. That's impossible, I know. But try anyhow. It's the only way. I don't know any other."

"But WHAT am I going to see!!" I almost shouted. I barely kept myself from grabbing him by the shoulders and giving him a good shake as he sat there staring into the corner, with his tired sunburned face, every word he uttered costing a visible effort.

"I don't know. In a certain sense it depends on you."

"Hallucinations?"

"No. It's—real. Don't. . . attack. Remember."

"What are you talking about?" I said in a voice not my own.

"We're not on Earth."

"Polytheria? But they don't look anything like humans!" I burst out. I didn't know what to do to make him snap out of his trance, in which he seemed to be reading something so senseless it chilled the blood in his veins.

"That's exactly why it's so terrible," he said quietly. "Remember: be on your guard!"

"What happened to Gibarian?"

He didn't answer.

"What's Sartorius doing?"

"Come back in an hour."

I turned and left. As I opened the door I looked at him one more

time. He sat with his face in his hands, small, shrunken, in stained pants. It was only now that I noticed he had dried blood on the knuckles of both hands.

The tubular corridor was empty. I stood for a moment at the closed door, listening. The walls must have been thin, from outside there came the whining of the wind. On the door there was a crooked rectangle of first-aid plaster that had been stuck up carelessly, bearing the inscription: "Human." I stared at the scrawled, barely legible word. For a moment I thought about going back to Snaut, but I realized that wasn't possible.

His demented warning still rang in my ears. I moved off, and my shoulders were bowed by the bothersome weight of the space suit. Quietly, as if hiding from an unseen observer, I returned to the circular hall with the five doors. They bore nameplates: Dr. Gibarian, Dr. Snaut, Dr. Sartorius. On the fourth there was no name. I hesitated, then pressed down lightly on the handle and slowly pushed. As it opened I had the feeling, bordering on certainty, that someone was there. I went inside.

There was no one. An identical convex window, though slightly smaller, looked out onto the ocean, which from here, against the sun, shone greasily, as if reddened olive oil were dripping from the crests of the waves. The crimson glow filled the entire room, which was like a spaceship cabin. On one side there were shelves with books and other items, a bunk strapped to the wall and secured with universal joints; on the other were numerous cabinets, between which were aerial photographs stuck together in nickel-plated frames. In metal holders there were flasks and test tubes stopped with cotton wool. By the window were two rows of white enamel cases so close together there was hardly room to squeeze through. The lids of some of them were half-open; they were full of different kinds of tools and plastic hoses. In both corners there were faucets, a smoke extractor, freezers; a microscope stood on the floor, since there was no longer any room for it on the large table next to the window. When I turned around, right by the door I saw an open locker as high as the ceiling filled with overalls, work wear and protective aprons; there was underwear on the shelves, and among the anti-radiation boots was the glint of aluminum flasks for use with portable oxygen packs. Two packs complete with masks hung from the rail of the raised bed. Everywhere there was the same disarray, which had been only hurriedly and superficially tidied. I sniffed the air testingly and smelled a faint aroma of chemical reagents and the trace of a sharp odor—could it possibly have been chlorine? Instinctively my eyes sought the ventilation grates in the upper corners of the room. The slips of paper fastened to their frames were flapping gently to show the compressors

were working, maintaining normal air circulation. I moved the books, apparatus, and tools from two chairs, stuffing them into the corners as best I could, till some space was more or less cleared around the bed between the locker and the shelves. I pulled up a stand to hang my space suit on; I took hold of the zippers, but let go immediately. I couldn't bring myself to take off the suit, as if it would leave me defenseless. Once again I took in the whole room. I checked the door was properly closed, and since there was no lock, after a moment's hesitation I pushed the two heaviest crates against it. Once this makeshift barricade was in place, with a couple of tugs I freed myself of the heavy, creaking garment. A narrow mirror inside the locker reflected part of the room. Out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of a movement there; I started, but it turned out to be my own reflection. The shirt I had on under my space suit was drenched in sweat. I yanked it off and pushed the locker sideways. It slid aside; in an alcove behind it were the gleaming walls of a tiny bathroom. On the ground under the shower was a large flat case. Not without difficulty, I hauled it into the main room. When I laid it on the floor the lid popped open as if on a spring and I saw compartments filled with bizarre exhibits: a host of implements similar to those in the cabinets, but in approximate or distorted versions in dark metal. None of them were of any use: they were misshapen, blunted, half-melted, as if they'd been in a fire. The strangest thing was that the handles, which were made of ceramite and so virtually unmeltable, were damaged in the same way. No laboratory oven would have been capable of reaching the temperatures necessary to produce this effect—unless it was inside an atomic pile. From the pocket of my space suit I took out a small Geiger counter, but when I held it up to the mangled tools its black beak remained silent.

I was wearing only underwear and a loose weave tee shirt. I tossed both on the floor like rags and, naked, jumped in the shower. The sudden rush of water felt like relief. I twisted beneath the hard, hot stream of water, massaging my body, snorting, all in a somehow exaggerated way, as if I was shaking off, expelling from myself, the whole obscure uncertainty that filled the Station with its infectious suspicions.

From the locker I dug out a light track suit that could also be worn under a space suit, and transferred all my modest belongings to its pockets. Between the pages of my notebook I felt something hard; it was the key to my apartment on Earth. Goodness knows how it had gotten there. I turned it in my fingers a moment, not knowing what to do with it. In the end I laid it on the table. It occurred to me I might need a weapon. My all-purpose pocket knife certainly wouldn't do the trick, but I didn't have anything else, and I wasn't yet in the kind of

mental state that would make me go looking for a ray gun or anything of that kind. I sat on a metal chair in the middle of the open space, far from all objects. I wanted to be alone. I was glad to see I still had half an hour. I couldn't help it; exactitude in carrying out any commitment, however important or trivial, was always in my nature. The hands of the twenty-four hour clock stood at 7 am. The sun was setting. Seven local time was twenty hundred hours on the *Prometheus*. Solaris would be shrinking to the size of a dot on Moddard's screen; it would be indistinguishable from the stars. But what could the *Prometheus* matter to me? I closed my eyes. There was total silence, aside from the whine of the pipes at regular intervals. Water ticked softly in the bathroom as it dripped into the porcelain basin.

Gibarian was dead. If I'd understood Snaut correctly, less than a day had passed since his death. What had they done with the body? Had they buried it? Oh, right, on this planet that couldn't be done. I thought about it in a matter-of-fact way for a long while, as if what had been become of the dead man was the most essential thing here, until, realizing how ridiculous these thoughts were, I stood up and began pacing diagonally across the room. With the tip of my foot I kicked at the books scattered about, at a small empty field satchel. I bent down and picked it up. It turned out not to be empty after all. It contained a dark glass bottle that weighed so little it felt like it was made of paper. I held it up to the window, where the last dismal red light of the sunset was blurred by a dirty mist. What was wrong with me? Why was I occupying myself with any old nonsense, with whatever insignificant trifle fell to my hand?

I gave a start—the light had come on. Of course, the photo-cell, triggered by the falling dusk. I was filled with anticipation; the tension had grown to the point where I didn't want to have open space behind me. I decided to fight it. I moved the chair up to the shelves. I took down a book I knew only too well—the second volume of Hughes and Eugel's old *History of Solaris*—and started flipping through it, resting the thick, stiff spine on my lap.

Solaris had been discovered almost a hundred years before I was born. The planet orbits two suns, a red one and a blue one. For over forty years no spaceship came near to it. In those days the Gamov-Shapley hypothesis, concerning the impossibility of life arising on planets around double stars, went unquestioned. The orbits of such planets are constantly changing from the gravitational interplay of two suns circling around one another.

The resulting perturbations successively reduce and expand the planet's orbit, and the beginnings of life, if they emerge, are destroyed by radiant heat or freezing cold. These changes occur over a period of millions of years, which is to say, on an astronomical or biological

scale (for evolution requires hundreds of millions, if not billions, of years) a very short time.

According to initial calculations, in the course of five hundred thousand years Solaris was supposed to move to within half an astronomical unit of its red sun, then after another million years fall into its burning maw.

But only ten or twenty years later it became apparent that the planet's orbit was not showing the expected changes, exactly as if it were as regular as the courses of planets in our own Solar System.

The observations and calculations were now repeated, this time with the utmost exactness, and they revealed only what was already known: that Solaris possessed an unstable orbit.

From one of several hundred planets discovered yearly and added into the great databases with a few notes concerning the fundamentals of their motion, Solaris advanced to the rank of a body worthy of special attention.

As a consequence, four years after this discovery it was orbited by the Ottenskjold expedition, which studied it from the *Laocoon* and two accompanying auxiliary ships. This expedition constituted a makeshift, improvised reconnaissance, the more so because it lacked the capability to make a landing. It launched into equatorial and polar orbit a number of unmanned observer satellites whose main task was to take measurements of gravitational potentials. Furthermore, it investigated the surface of the planet, which was almost in its entirety covered by ocean, and the few plateaus rising above it. Their combined area was less than that of Europe, though Solaris was twenty percent larger than Earth in diameter. Those scraps of rocky, desert-like land, scattered irregularly across the planet, were mostly found in the southern hemisphere. Studies were also conducted on the atmosphere, which contained no oxygen, and highly detailed measurements were taken of the density of the planet, as well as its albedo and other astronomical indicators. As expected, no life forms were found either on the land or in the ocean.

Over the following ten years Solaris, now the center of attention of all observatories in the area, demonstrated a remarkable tendency to maintain what was beyond any doubt a gravitationally unstable orbit. For a while there was a hint of scandal in the matter, since (in the interests of science) attempts were made to blame the results of these observations either on certain people, or on the instruments they employed.

A shortage of funding delayed the dispatch of a proper expedition to Solaris for three more years, till the moment when Shannahan, having assembled a crew, managed to secure three C-tonnage

cosmodrome class vessels from the Institute. A year and a half before the arrival of the expedition, which set off from the Alpha Aquarii region, a second exploratory fleet put an unmanned Satelloid, Luna 247, in solar orbit on behalf of the Institute. The Satelloid, rebuilt three times over the space of several decades, has continued to work to this day. The data it collected definitively confirmed what the Ottenskjold expedition had observed concerning the active nature of the ocean's movements.

One of Shannahan's ships remained at a high orbit while the other two made the necessary preparations and landed on a rocky stretch of ground that occupied about six hundred square miles at Solaris's south pole. The expedition wrapped up its work after eighteen months; it went well, except for one accident caused by an equipment malfunction. The crew, however, divided into two mutually opposing camps. The object of their disagreement was the ocean. On the basis of their analyses it had been designated an organic formation (at that time, no one dared say it was alive). Yet while the biologists saw it as a primitive being—something like an immense syncytium, in other words a single, monstrously grown, fluid cell (even though they called it a "prebiological form") that extended across the entire globe in a jelly-like covering whose depth reached several miles in places—the astronomers and physicists, on the other hand, claimed it must be a highly organized structure, perhaps exceeding terrestrial organisms in its complexity, since it was capable of actively influencing the orbit of its plane -- for no other cause had been discovered that might explain Solaris's behavior. In addition, planetary physicists had uncovered a relationship between certain processes in the plasmic ocean and local measurements of gravitational potential, which changed depending on the ocean's "metabolic rate."

In this way it was physicists, not biologists, who proposed the paradoxical formulation "plasmic machine" to refer to a formation that in our sense might be devoid of life, but was capable of undertaking purposive actions on a scale that, let us add at once, was astronomical.

In this dispute, which in the space of weeks sucked in every leading authority like a whirlwind, the Gamov-Shapley hypothesis was brought into question for the first time in eighty years.

For a period efforts were made to defend it by asserting that the ocean had nothing to do with life, that it wasn't even a "parabiological" or "pre-biological" formation, but a geological entity, no doubt of an unusual kind, but whose only capability was to preserve Solaris's orbit through changes in gravitational pull (reference was made to Le Châtelier's principle).

To counter this conservatism there arose suggestions such as the Civita-Vitty hypothesis, one of the better constructed, claiming that the ocean was the product of a dialectical development: starting from its original form, that of a proto-ocean, a solution of sluggishly interacting chemical substances, under the pressure of conditions (meaning the orbital changes that threatened its existence), without passing through all the terrestrial stages of development -- that is to say, the emergence of protozoa and metazoa, plant and animal evolution. Without developing a nervous system, it had been able to jump directly to the phase of a “homeostatic ocean.” Put simply, unlike terrestrial organisms it did not adapt to its surroundings over the course of hundreds of millions of years, so as only then to produce a rational species, but it had gained control over its environment from the start.

This was highly original, except that it was still the case no one knew how a syrupy jelly could stabilize the orbit of a celestial body. For almost a century there had existed devices that created artificial force fields and gravitational fields—gravitors—but no one could even imagine how the effects a gravitor achieves through a complex series of nuclear reactions and extremely high temperatures could be accomplished by an amorphous ooze. In the newspapers—which in those days, to the delight of their readers and the despair of scientists, reveled in the most indiscriminate conjectures concerning the “enigma of Solaris”—there were claims that the planetary ocean was a distant relative of earth’s electric eel.

When the problem was at least in some measure cleared up, it transpired that as was so often the case with Solaris, one mystery had been replaced with another that was perhaps even more puzzling.

Research revealed that the ocean did not operate at all like our gravitors (which, of course, would have been impossible), but that it was capable of directly modeling space-time specifications, which led among other things to variations in the measurement of time at one and the same meridian on Solaris. In this way the ocean not only in a certain sense knew the Einstein-Boeve hypothesis, but (unlike us humans) was even able to make use of its consequences.

When this emerged, one of the most tempestuous storms of our century broke out in the scientific world. Some of the most venerable theories, universally regarded as correct, collapsed in ruins, the most heretical articles began to appear in the scientific literature, and the “brilliant ocean” versus “gravitational jelly” debate set every mind on fire.

All this happened a good fifteen or so years before I was born. When I was at school, thanks to facts discovered later, Solaris was

widely regarded as a planet endowed with life—but with only a single inhabitant. . .

The second volume of Hughes and Eugel, which I was still abstractedly thumbing through, opened with a taxonomy that was as original as it was amusing. A classification table showed the following:

Type: *Polytheria*

Order: *Syncytialia*

Class: *Metamorphia*.

It was as if we knew goodness knows how many specimens, whereas in reality there was still only one, which admittedly weighted seventeen billion tons.

I flipped past colored diagrams and graphs, analyses and spectrographs setting out the class and tempo of basic metabolism and its chemical reactions. The deeper I immersed myself in the bulky tome, the more mathematics appeared on its chalk-white pages. It might have seemed that our knowledge of this representative of the class of *Metamorphia*, which lay swathed in the darkness of its four-hour night a thousand or so feet below the steel bed of the Station, was complete.

In reality, however, not everyone agreed that this was a “being,” quite aside from the question of whether an ocean could be called rational. I plonked the big book back on the shelf and took down the next volume. It was divided into two parts. The first constituted a summary of the results of all the innumerable experiments aimed at making contact with the ocean. As I remember only too well, this contact was the source of endless anecdotes, witticisms, and jokes when I was in school; medieval scholastics seemed a model of clarity compared with the jungle that this matter gave rise to. The second part of the volume, comprising almost thirteen hundred pages, contained nothing but a bibliography. There would not have been space in the room I was in for all the original literature on the topic.

The first attempts at contact employed special electronic devices that transformed stimuli sent in both directions. The ocean played an active part in the design of the devices -- though all this happened in complete darkness. What does it mean to say it “played an active part”? It modified certain components of the equipment lowered into it, as a result of which the discharges it registered would change, and the devices would record a multitude of signals that were like fragments of some vast advanced analysis. But what did it all mean? Perhaps these data captured a temporary state of excitation of the ocean? Perhaps they were impulses that gave rise to its immense creations, somewhere thousands of miles from the researchers? Perhaps they were expressions of the ocean’s eternal truths, converted

into inscrutable electronic formulations? Perhaps they were its works of art? Who could know, since it was never possible to produce the same reaction to a stimulus twice? Since one time the response would be an explosion of impulses that almost blew the apparatus up, the next time profound silence? Since no experiment could ever be replicated? It always seemed as if we were on the brink of deciphering this constantly accumulating sea of readings; it was for this purpose that electronic brains were constructed with the ability to process more information than had ever been required by any problem before now. And, in fact, certain results were obtained. The ocean—a source of electrical, magnetic, and gravitational impulses—spoke as it were in the language of mathematics; certain sequences of its electrical discharges could be classified by drawing on the most abstract branches of terrestrial analysis and of set theory; they contained homologues of structures known from the area of physics that is concerned with the mutual relationship between energy and matter, finite and infinite magnitude, particles and fields. All this led scientists to believe they were dealing with a thinking monster, that it was some kind of protoplasmic sea-cum-brain grown so vast it covered an entire planet, which passed time engrossed in theoretical reflections on an inconceivable scale concerning the nature of the universe; and that what the instruments captured were no more than tiny, accidentally overheard snippets of a stupendous monologue, utterly beyond our comprehension, that was endlessly being performed in its depths.

So much for the mathematicians. These hypotheses were regarded by some as an underestimation of human capability, as an obeisance toward something we didn't yet comprehend, but which could be understood as a resurrection of the old doctrine of *ignoramus et ignorabimus*—"we do not know and will not know." Others saw these as harmful, sterile fairy stories, and claimed the mathematicians' hypotheses revealed a latter-day mythology that saw an immense brain—whether electronic or plasmic—as the highest goal of being, the sum total of existence.

While others yet. . . but scientists and opinions were legion. Besides, all the attempts at "establishing contact" were nothing compared to other branches of solaristics, in which specializations grew so advanced a cybernetician was barely able to communicate with a symmetriadologist. Veubeke, who at the time, during my studies, was director of the Institute, once jokingly asked: "How can you communicate with the ocean if you can't communicate with each other?" His jibe contained much truth.

For it wasn't by accident that the ocean had been classed as a *Metamorphia*. Its undulating surface was capable of giving rise to the most diverse formations that bore no resemblance to anything

terrestrial, on top of which the purpose—adaptive, cognitive, or whatever—of those often violent eruptions of plasmic “creativity” remained a total mystery.

Returning the volume to the shelf—it was so heavy I had to lift it with both hands—I thought to myself that what we know about Solaris, all the knowledge that filled this library, was useless ballast, a mere quagmire of facts, and that we were in the same position as when we’d started to gather this information seventy-eight years ago; in fact, the situation was a lot worse, since all the labors of those years had proved to be in vain.

That which we knew in detail contained nothing but contradictions. The ocean did not employ machines or construct them, though in certain circumstances it seemed capable of doing so, since it copied components of some of the devices lowered into it. But it did so only in the first two years of the exploratory research; after that, with boundless patience it ignored repeated attempts, as if it had lost all interest in our instruments and artifacts (and thus, it seemed, in us). To continue with our “negative knowledge,” it did not possess a nervous system, or cells, or any structure resembling protein. It didn’t always respond to stimuli, even the most powerful (for instance, it completely “ignored” the disaster involving the auxiliary rocket ship of Giese’s second expedition, which plummeted from a height of two hundred miles to the surface of the planet, destroying plasma for a mile and a half around when its atomic piles exploded).

In scientific circles the “case of Solaris” gradually began to sound like a lost cause, especially among the academic leadership of the Institute, where in recent years voices had been raised calling for cuts in future research funding. No one yet dared suggest closing down the Station completely; this would be too overt an admission of failure. Though some, at least privately, said that all we needed was a strategy for as “honorable” a retreat as possible from the “Solaris affair.”

But for many, especially young people, this “affair” eventually became something of a touchstone of one’s own worth. “In essence,” they would say, “the stakes are higher than exploring the civilization of Solaris; this is about us ourselves, about the limits of human cognition.”

For some time one popular view, eagerly disseminated by the press, was that the thinking ocean covering the whole of Solaris was a gigantic brain more advanced by millions of years than our own civilization, that it was some kind of “cosmic yogi,” a sage, omniscience incarnate, which had long ago grasped the futility of all action and for this reason was maintaining a categorical silence towards us. This was simply untrue, because the living ocean certainly

does act—it's just that it does so according to notions other than those of humans, it doesn't build cities or bridges, or flying machines; it doesn't try to conquer space or cross it (something defenders of human superiority insisted on seeing as an invaluable trump card for us). Instead, it occupies itself with thousand fold transformations—"ontological autometamorphosis" (there was no lack of learned terminology in the literature on Solaris!). Since, on the other hand, anyone plunging stubbornly into all this literature cannot resist the impression that though he encounters fragments of perhaps brilliant intellectual constructions, these fragments are mixed indiscriminately with the products of utter foolishness bordering on insanity, as an antithesis to the concept of the "oceanic yogi" there arose the idea of the "oceanic idiot."

These hypotheses resuscitated one of the most ancient of philosophical problems—the relationship between matter and consciousness. It took a fair amount of courage to lead the way, like du Haart, in attributing consciousness to the ocean. This problem, which the methodologists over-hastily classified as metaphysical, smoldered beneath virtually every discussion and dispute. Was thinking without consciousness possible? Yet could the processes that took place in the ocean be regarded as thought? Is a mountain a very large rock? Is a planet a huge mountain? These terms can be used, but the new scale of magnitude brings with it new regularities and new phenomena.

This problem became a squaring of the circle for our times. Every independent thinker strove to make his own contribution to the treasury of solaristics. Theories multiplied. They claimed we were dealing with the result of a degeneration or regression that had set in after the period of the ocean's "intellectual splendor"; or that the ocean was in fact a neoplastic glioma which, having come into existence within the bodies of former inhabitants of the planet, had consumed them all and swallowed them up, fusing the remains together in the form of an everlasting, self-rejuvenating, supracellular element.

In the white glow of neon lamps that was reminiscent of terrestrial light I removed the instruments and books from the table and, spreading a map of Solaris on the plastic surface, I leaned over it, my hands resting on the metal trim. The living ocean had its shallows and its trenches, while its islands were coated with a deposit of weathered minerals that showed they had once constituted its bottom. Did it also regulate the rise and fall of the rock formations immersed in its utterly dark bosom? I gazed at the massive hemispheres on the map, colored in various shades of purple and pale blue. I felt, as countless times before in my life, a sense of wonder just as thrilling as

the first time, when as a boy I had learned at school about the existence of Solaris.

I don't know how it came about that my surroundings—including the lurking mystery of Gibarian's death, even my own unknown future—all suddenly seemed unimportant, and I thought about nothing whatsoever as I pored over the map, which any human would have found overwhelming.

The various areas of the living formation were named after scientists who had dedicated their lives to exploring them. I was studying the Thexall gliamassif that flowed around the equatorial islands, when I felt someone's eyes on me.

I was still standing over the map, but I no longer saw it, it was as if I were paralyzed. The door was straight in front of me; it was barricaded with crates, plus I'd pushed a locker against them. Must have been an automat, I thought to myself, though there hadn't been any in the room before, and none could have come in without my noticing. The skin on my back and the nape of my neck began to tingle, the feeling of a hard, motionless gaze was becoming unbearable. I didn't realize that as I shrank my head into my shoulders I was leaning more and more heavily on the table; in the end it began to move slowly across the floor, and it was this movement that seemed to free me. I turned around abruptly.

The room was empty. In front of me there was only the gaping black of the bay window. The sensation lingered. The darkness was looking at me, amorphous, immense, eyeless, devoid of limits. The gloom outside was unbrightened by even a single star. I drew the lightproof drapes. I'd not even been a whole hour at the Station and I was already starting to understand why incidents of paranoia had occurred here. I connected it instinctively with Gibarian's death. Knowing him, I'd thought till now that nothing could have disturbed his mind. I was no longer so sure.

I stood in the middle of the room next to the table. My breathing grew calmer. I could feel the sweat that had broken out on my forehead cooling. What had I been thinking about a moment ago? That's right—automats. The fact that I'd not seen a single one in the corridor or in the cabins was very strange. Where had they all gone? The only one I'd encountered—at a distance—had belonged to the mechanized service at the docking bay. What about the others?

I glanced at my watch. It was just about time to go and see Snaut.

I left the cabin. The corridor was rather dimly lit by fluorescent lighting strips mounted on the ceiling. I passed two doors and came to the one that bore Gibarian's name. For a long time I stood in front of it. The Station was filled with silence. I took hold of the door handle.

The truth was, I really didn't want to go in. The handle moved downwards, the door cracked open an inch or so, there was a gap that for a moment was black, then the light came on. Now I could be seen by anyone walking along the corridor. I quickly crossed the threshold and closed the door behind me, quietly and firmly. Then I turned around.

I stood with my back almost touching the door. The cabin was bigger than mine; it also had a panoramic window, which was three-fourths covered by a net curtain decorated with small blue and pink flowers that was clearly not a Station fitting but had been brought from Earth. The walls were lined with bookshelves and cabinets, both painted with a very pale green enamel that had a silvery sheen. Their contents had been tipped onto the floor in piles, and lay heaped among the upright chairs and armchairs. Right in front of me the way was barred by two tables on wheels that were tipped over and partially buried in mounds of journals that were spilling from damaged binders. Books with pages flapping open were drenched in fluids from broken flasks and bottles with fitted corks that mostly were made of such thick glass that simply being dropped on the floor, even from a considerable height, would not have been enough to smash them. By the window was an overturned desk with a broken adjustable lamp; a stool lay in front of it, two of its legs thrust among the half-open drawers. There was a veritable flood of papers, handwritten sheets, and other documents spilling across the entire floor. I recognized Gibarian's handwriting and bent down. As I picked up loose sheets of notepaper I noticed that my arm was casting not one shadow as it had till now, but two.

I turned around. As if it had been set alight from the top, the pink curtain was burning with a vivid line of fierce blue fire that was widening with every moment. I tugged the fabric aside, and my eyes were struck by a terrifying blaze. It occupied a third of the horizon. A tangle of weirdly elongated shadows ran across the indentations of the waves toward the Station. It was the dawn. In the zone where the Station was located, after an hour-long night, the planet's second, blue sun rose into the sky. The automatic switch turned off the ceiling lights as I went back to the scattered papers. I found a concise outline of an experiment that had been prepared three weeks before—Gibarian had planned to subject the plasma to extremely hard X-radiation. From the text I gathered the description was meant for Sartorius, who was to set up the experiment; what I had in my hand was a copy. The white sheets of paper were starting to dazzle me. The day that was beginning was different from the preceding one. Beneath the orange sky of the cooling sun the ocean, ink-black with bloody flecks, was almost always covered with a dirty pink mist that fused

sky, clouds, and waves together. Now all this had disappeared. Even filtered by the pink fabric, the light glowed like the burner of a powerful halogen lamp. It made the suntan on my arms look almost gray. The whole room was transformed. Everything that had been red turned brown and faded to the color of liver, whereas the color of white, green, and yellow objects was so intensified they looked as if they were emitting their own glow. I squinted through the crack in the curtains. The sky was a white sea of fire, beneath which what looked like molten metal was twitching and trembling. I squeezed my eyes shut at the red circles that were filling my field of vision. On the shelf of the washbasin, the edge of which was cracked, I found a pair of sunglasses and put them on; they covered almost half of my face. The curtain covering the window was now flaring like a sodium flame. I went on reading, picking up sheets of paper from the floor and stacking them on the one small table still standing. Parts of the text were missing.

These were reports of experiments already conducted. From them I learned that the ocean had been subjected to radiation for four days, at a point located fourteen hundred miles northeast of the Station. All this shocked me, since the use of X-rays had been banned by a UN convention because of their lethal effect, and I was quite sure no one had sought permission on Earth for these studies. At a certain moment I raised my head and in the mirror of an open locker I caught sight of my own reflection, a deathly pale face in dark glasses. The room looked extraordinary, burning white and light blue. But a few minutes later there was an extended grinding noise and hermetic blinds came down outside the windows. The room darkened, then the artificial lighting came back on, now strangely wan. The place heated up, till at one point the steady hum from the air conditioning conduits turned into a strained whine. The cooling system of the Station was working at full blast. Despite this, the lifeless heat kept intensifying.

I heard footsteps. Someone was coming down the corridor. In a couple of soundless strides I was at the door. The steps slowed and stopped. Whoever it was, was standing outside the door. The handle moved slightly. Without thinking, I grabbed it from my side and held on. The pressure didn't increase, but neither did it ease off. The person on the other side was being as silent as me, as if taken aback. For a good while we both held onto the handle. Then it jumped back up suddenly in my hand. It had been released, and a rustling sound let me know that the other person was walking away. I stood for a moment longer, listening intently, but nothing could be heard.

I hurriedly folded Gibarian's notes in four and stuck them in my pocket. I went slowly up to the locker and looked inside. The overalls and other clothing were squashed into a corner, as if someone had been standing in there. The corner of an envelope was poking out from under a pile of papers on the floor. I picked it up. It was addressed to me. My heart suddenly in my throat, I ripped the envelope open and had to force myself to unfold the small sheet of paper that was inside.

In his even, tiny but legible handwriting Gibarian had noted:

Yearbook of Solaristics Volume I, Appendix, also: Minority report by Messenger re: F. Ravintzer's *Minor Apocrypha*.

That was all, not one word more. The writing showed signs of haste. Was this some kind of important information? When had he written it? I realized I needed to get to the library as soon as possible. I knew the appendix to the first volume of the *Yearbook of Solaristics*; that is to say, I knew of its existence, but I'd never had it in my hand, for it was of historical interest only. Ravintzer, on the other hand, and his *Minor Apocrypha*, I had never even heard of.

What should I do?

I was already fifteen minutes late. One more time, from the door I took in the whole room. It was only now that I noticed a folding bunk stowed vertically against the wall—it was hidden by a map of Solaris. Something had been hung behind the map. It was a miniature tape recorder in a case. I took out the recorder and returned the case to where it had been before. I checked the counter—almost an entire reel had been used up. I slipped the recorder into my pocket.

Once again, for a second I stood by the door, my eyes closed, listening intently to the silence that reigned outside. Nothing. I opened the door; the corridor looked like a black chasm. It was only when I took off the dark glasses that I saw the faint ceiling lighting. I closed the door behind me and set off left, to the radio station.

I was close to the circular chamber from which corridors branched off like the spokes of a wheel. As I was passing a narrow side hallway leading, I think, to the bathrooms, I caught sight of a large, indistinct figure that almost merged into the background.

I stood rooted to the ground. From the far end of the side passage a huge black woman was coming towards me with an unhurried waddling gait. I saw the whites of her eyes glinting and at almost exactly the same moment I heard the soft slap of her bare feet. She had nothing on but a skirt that glistened yellow, as if it were made of

straw. She had massive pendulous breasts, and her black arms were as thick as a normal person's thighs. She passed three feet from me without so much as a glance and walked off, her elephantine rump swaying like one of those steatopygic Stone Age sculptures found in anthropological museums. At the place where the corridor curved, she turned to the side and disappeared into Gibarian's cabin. When she opened the door, for a split second she stood in the brighter light coming from inside. Then the door closed softly and I was on my own. I took my left wrist in my right hand and squeezed with all my might, till the bones cracked. I looked around distractedly. What had just happened? What had that been? All at once, as if I'd been struck, I recalled Snaut's warning. What was it supposed to mean? Who had that monstrous Aphrodite been? Where had she come from? I took one, only one, step towards Gibarian's cabin, and froze. I knew only too well I wasn't going to go in there. I sniffed the air with flared nostrils. Something was wrong, something was out of place. That was it! I'd instinctively expected the distinct, repulsive odor of her sweat, but even when she passed a couple of feet from me I hadn't smelled a thing.

I don't know how long I stood there leaning against the cold metal wall. The Station was plunged in silence, the only audible sound the distant drone of the air conditioning compressors.

I slapped myself lightly in the face and slowly made my way to the radio station. When I pressed down on the door handle, I heard a voice say sharply:

"Who's there?"

"It's me, Kelvin."

He was sitting at a table between a pile of aluminum crates and the transmission console, eating meat concentrate straight from the can. I don't know why he'd chosen to set up quarters in the radio station. I stood at the door, dazed, staring at his regularly chewing jaws, and suddenly realized I was hungry. I went up to the shelves, took the least dusty plate from a pile and sat down opposite him. For some time we ate without speaking. Then Snaut stood up, took a thermos flask from a wall cabinet and poured us each a cup of hot bouillon. Putting the thermos down on the floor, as there was no room on the table, he asked:

"Have you seen Sartorius?"

"No. Where is he?"

"Upstairs."

Upstairs was the laboratory. We continued eating in silence, till the metal scraped at the bottom of the empty can. Night reigned in the radio station. The window was tightly covered from the outside; the

room was lit by four circular fluorescent ceiling lamps. Their reflections quivered in the plastic cover of the console.

Red capillaries marked the taut skin on Snaut's cheekbones. Now he was wearing a tattered loose black sweater.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"No? Why would it be?"

"You're sweating."

I wiped my forehead with my hand. It was true—I was dripping with sweat. It must have been a reaction to the shock I'd just had. He scrutinized me. Should I tell him? I'd rather he'd have shown more trust in me. Who was playing against whom, and in what incomprehensible way?

"It's hot here," I said. "I thought your air conditioning would be working better."

"It'll catch up in an hour or so. Are you sure it's only from the heat?" He looked up at me. I chewed my food steadily as if I hadn't noticed.

"What do you mean to do?" he asked finally, after we were done eating. He dropped the full dishes and the empty cans in the sink by the wall and came back to his chair.

"I'll fit in with your plans," I replied impassively. "You have a research program, right? Some new kind of stimulus, apparently X-rays or something like that?"

"X-rays?" He raised his eyebrows. "Where did you hear that?"

"I don't remember. Someone told me. On the *Prometheus* maybe. Why? Is it already under way?"

"I don't know the details. It was Gibarian's idea. He started it with Sartorius. But how could you know about it?"

I shrugged.

"You don't know the details? You should have been part of it; I mean, it's partly your area. . ." I trailed off. He said nothing. The whine from the air conditioning quieted down, but the temperature remained at a tolerable level. There was merely a permanent high tone hanging in the air, like the buzz of a dying fly. Snaut stood, went up to the console and began flipping switches senselessly, since the main lever was in the off position. He fooled around like this for a while then, still with his back to me, he remarked:

"It'll be necessary to complete the formalities regarding the. . . you know."

"Is that so?"

He turned and looked at me as if close to rage. I can't say I was deliberately trying to needle him, but not understanding any part of

the game that was being played here I preferred to be guarded. His bony Adam's apple moved up and down beneath the black turtleneck of his sweater.

"You were in Gibarian's room," he said abruptly.

I jerked my head as if to say, "Let's say I was."

I wanted him to go on.

"Who was there?"

He knew about her!

"No one. Who could have been there?" I asked.

"So why wouldn't you let me in?"

I smiled.

"I got scared. After your warning, when the handle moved I grabbed it instinctively. Why didn't you say it was you? I'd have let you in."

"I thought it was Sartorius," he said unsurely.

"What of it?"

"What do you think about. . . what happened there?" he said, answering a question with a question.

I hesitated.

"You must know better than me. Where is he?"

"In the cold room," he replied immediately. "We moved him there right away in the morning. . . because of the heat."

"Where did you find him?"

"In a locker."

"In a locker? He was dead already?"

"His heart was still beating, but he wasn't breathing. He was in his death throes."

"Did you try to save him?"

"No."

"Why not?"

He paused.

"I was too late. He died before I could lie him down."

"He was standing in the closet? In amongst those overalls?"

"Yes."

He went up to a small desk in the corner and fetched a sheet of paper that had been lying on it. He placed it in front of me.

"I wrote a kind of interim report," he said. "It's actually good that you took a look at the room. Cause of death. . . injection of a lethal dose of Pernostal. It's written here. . ."

I scanned the brief text.

“Suicide,” I repeated quietly. “And the reason?”

“Nervous breakdown. . . depression. . . or whatever it ought to be called. You know these things better than I do.”

“I only know what I can see myself,” I replied and looked up into his eyes, for he was standing over me.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked calmly.

“He injected himself with Pernostal and hid in a closet, yes? If that was the case, it wasn’t depression or nervous breakdown, it was severe psychosis. Paranoia. . . He probably thought he was seeing something. . . ,” I said, speaking ever more slowly and looking him in the eye.

He walked off to the radio console and started flicking switches again.

“Your signature is here,” I said after a moment’s silence. “What about Sartorius?”

“He’s in the lab. I already told you. He doesn’t come out. I’m assuming that. . .”

“That what?”

“That he’s locked himself in.”

“Locked himself in? I see. Locked himself in. How about that. Perhaps he’s barricaded the door?”

“Perhaps.”

“Snaut. . . ,” I said. “There’s someone on the Station.”

“You’ve seen?!”

He looked across at me as he leaned over.

“You warned me. About who? Was it a hallucination?”

“What did you see?”

“It’s a human, yes?”

He said nothing. He turned towards the wall, as if he didn’t want me to see his face. He drummed his fingers on a metal partition. I looked at his hands. There was no trace of blood on his knuckles. I had a flash of insight.

“That person is real,” I said softly, almost in a whisper, as if I were telling him a secret that could be overheard. “Right? She can be. . . touched. She can be. . . hurt. . . The last time you saw her was today.”

“How do you know?”

He didn’t turn around. He stood right by the wall, his chest leaning against it as my words struck him.

“Right before I landed. . . Not long before?”

He flinched as if from a blow. I saw the wild look in his eyes.

“You?!” he stammered out. “Who are YOU?”

He looked as if he was about to pounce on me. That I was not expecting. The situation was upside down. So he didn’t believe I was who I said I was? What was this supposed to mean?! He was staring at me in absolute terror. Was he mad already? Poisoned? Anything was becoming possible. But I’d seen her—this creature; so then I myself. . . also. . . ?

“Who was it?” I asked. My words calmed him. For a moment he eyed me as if he still didn’t believe me. Before he even opened his mouth I knew it had been a false move on my part and that he wouldn’t answer me.

He eased himself into an arm chair and put his head in his hands.

“The things happening here. . . ,” he said in a low voice. “A malignant fever. . .”

“Who was it?” I asked once again.

“If you don’t know. . . ,” he murmured.

“Then what?”

“Then nothing.”

“Snaut,” I said, “We’re far enough away from home. Let’s play with open cards. Everything’s complicated enough as it is.”

“What do you mean?”

“That you should tell me who I saw.”

“And you. . . ?” he retorted suspiciously.

“You’re losing it. I’ll tell you and you tell me. You can rest assured I won’t think you’re crazy, because I know. . .”

“Crazy! Good God!” He tried to laugh. “You don’t, you have no. . . that would be a perfect solution. If *he* had believed for a moment it was madness, he wouldn’t have done it, he’d still be alive. . .”

“So what you said in the report about a nervous breakdown was a lie.”

“Of course!”

“Why won’t you write the truth?”

“Why. . . ?” he repeated.

There was a pause. Once again I was completely in the dark. I didn’t get a thing, though for a moment it seemed I’d managed to convince him to approach the mystery by combining forces. Why, why wouldn’t he say?!

“Where are the automats?” I put in.

“In the depositories. We locked them all away except for the docking bay service.”

“Why?”

Again he didn't answer.

"You won't say?"

"I can't."

There was something in all this that I couldn't put my finger on. Maybe I should go upstairs and see Sartorius? I suddenly remembered the note, and at the present moment that seemed the most important thing.

"Can you imagine going on working in these conditions?" I asked.

He gave a contemptuous shrug.

"What difference does it make?"

"Is that so? Then what do you intend to do?"

He said nothing. In the silence the distant sound of bare footsteps could be heard. Amid the plastic and nickel-plated implements, the tall lockers with electronic equipment, glassware, and precision instruments, that ambling, lazy tread sounded like a stupid trick performed by someone with a screw loose. The sound was coming closer. I stood up, intently watching Snaut. He was listening closely, his eyes narrowed to slits, but he didn't seem at all alarmed. So it wasn't her he was afraid of?

"Where did she come from?" I asked. Then, when he hesitated to answer: "Do you not want to say?"

"I don't know."

"All right."

The footsteps receded and faded away.

"You don't believe me?" he said. "I give you my word I don't know."

I was silent. I opened a locker containing space suits and pushed aside their heavy empty shells. As I suspected, at the back, hanging on hooks there were gas pistols used to move about in a gravitational vacuum. They weren't much use, but at least they were some kind of weapon. I preferred that to nothing. I checked the cartridge case and hung the strap of the holster over my arm. Snaut was observing me watchfully. As I adjusted the strap he bared his yellowed teeth in a mocking smile.

"Happy hunting!" he said.

"Thanks for everything," I retorted, heading for the door. He jumped up from his armchair.

"Kelvin!"

I looked at him. He was no longer smiling. I don't know that I've ever seen such a tired-looking face.

"Kelvin, it's not. . . I. . . I really can't," he stammered. I waited to

see if he'd say any more, but he just moved his lips as if he was trying to spit something out.

I turned and left without a word.

The corridor was empty. It first led straight, then curved to the right. I'd never been on the Station before but, as part of my preparatory training, for six weeks I'd lived in an exact copy of it on Earth, at the Institute. I knew where the aluminum steps led. The library was in darkness. I felt for the light switch. When I found the first volume of the *Yearbook of Solaristics* along with its Appendix in the index, a small red light came on as I pressed the key. I checked in the register. The volume had been checked out by Gibarian, along with another book: the aforementioned *Minor Apocrypha*. I turned the light off and went back downstairs. I was afraid to go into his cabin, despite the footsteps I'd heard before. She could have gone back there. For some time I stood outside the door, till eventually I gritted my teeth, got a grip on myself and entered.

The illuminated room was empty. I started rifling through the books scattered on the floor by the window; at a certain moment I went up to the locker and closed it. I couldn't look at that empty place among the overalls. The Appendix was not to be found by the window. I went through each book in turn, till I got to the last pile that lay between the locker and the bed. There I found the volume I was looking for.

I'd hoped to find some clue in it, and in fact, there was a bookmark inserted at the index of names. Underlined in red pencil was a name that meant nothing to me: André Berton. It appeared on two different pages. I found the first of these and learned that Berton had been the co-pilot on Shannahan's ship. The next mention of his name was over a hundred pages later. Immediately after landing, the expedition had proceeded with extreme caution, but when after sixteen days it transpired that the plasmic ocean not only showed no signs of aggression, but retreated from any object moved close to its surface and, whenever it could, avoided direct contact with instruments or people, Shannahan and his second-in-command Timolis lifted some of the restrictions on activities that had been imposed as precautions, since these restrictions seriously impeded the work that was to be done.

At that time the expedition was divided into small two- or three-person teams, each carrying out flights over the ocean that were often several hundred miles in duration. The sweepers that had previously been used to close off the research area were left at the Base. The first four days after this change of method went without any incident, aside from occasional damage to the oxygen apparatus on the space suits, since the exhaust valves proved susceptible to the corrosive

effect of the toxic atmosphere. Because of this they had to be replaced almost daily.

On the fifth day, or the twenty-first counting from the moment of landing, two scientists, Carucci and Fechner (the first was a radiologist, the second a physicist), conducted an exploratory flight over the ocean in a small two-person airmobile. It wasn't a flying craft but a boat that moves on a cushion of condensed air.

When they failed to return after six hours, Timolis, who was in charge at the Base during Shannahan's absence, ordered the alarm to be sounded and sent all available personnel out to search for the missing men.

By a disastrous coincidence radio contact was lost that day about an hour after the search parties set out; this was caused by a large sunspot on the red sun releasing a powerful burst of corpuscular radiation into the upper reaches of the atmosphere. Only ultra-short-wave equipment worked, allowing communication at a distance of no more than twelve or fifteen miles. To make matters worse, before the sun set the mist thickened and the search had to be interrupted.

When the search parties were already on their way back to the Base one of them found the airmobile no more than 80 miles from the shore. Its engine was working and the craft was drifting undamaged on the waves. Only one man, Carucci, was found in the cockpit, barely conscious.

The airmobile was brought back to the Base and Carucci was given medical treatment. That same evening he recovered. He was unable to say anything about what had happened to Fechner. He only remembered that when they'd already decided to head back he had started to have difficulty breathing. The exhaust valve of his apparatus had been jamming, and at each inbreath a small amount of toxic gas had gotten into his space suit.

Fechner must have unfastened his seatbelt and stood up as he attempted to fix the other man's equipment. That was the last thing Carucci remembered. According to the experts, the probable subsequent course of events had been as follows: as he worked on Carucci's oxygen pack, Fechner had opened the roof of the cockpit, probably because it was low and cramped his movements. This was permissible, since on such craft the cabin is not hermetic anyway and merely provides protection against wind and atmospheric conditions. During these operations Fechner's own apparatus must have developed a fault; growing light-headed, he had climbed up through the roof, gotten onto the top of the airmobile, and fallen into the ocean.

Such is the story of the ocean's first victim. A search for the body,

which ought to have floated on the waves in its space suit, was unsuccessful. Though it might have drifted: it was beyond the expedition's capabilities to comb thousands of square miles of undulating emptiness almost permanently covered with stretches of mist.

To return to the previous events, by nightfall all the search teams had returned, with the exception of a large freight helicopter that Berton had taken.

He appeared over the Base almost an hour after darkness had fallen, when there were already serious fears for his safety. He was in a state of nervous shock; he climbed out of the helicopter unaided, only to try to run away. Restrained, he shouted and wept; in a man with seventeen years' experience of space flight, often in the most punishing conditions, this was quite extraordinary.

The doctors suspected that Berton too was suffering from poisoning. Though he ostensibly regained his senses, he refused even for a moment to leave the expedition's main rocket ship; nor would he go up to the window, from which the ocean could be seen. After two days Berton declared he wished to submit a report concerning his flight. He insisted, claiming it was a matter of the utmost importance. When this report was examined by the expedition's advisory board it was determined to be the morbid product of a mind poisoned by the toxic gases of the atmosphere. As such it was included not in the records of the expedition but in Berton's medical case history, upon which the whole matter was closed.

So much was said in the Appendix. I surmised that the heart of the matter lay in Berton's actual report—what it was that had led a long-distance pilot to suffer a nervous breakdown. I looked once again through the piles of books, but I couldn't find the *Minor Apocrypha*. I was feeling more and more tired, so I put off further searching till the next day, and left the cabin. As I passed the aluminum stairs I saw patches of light from above. So Sartorius was still working at this hour! I decided I ought to pay him a visit.

Upstairs it was a little warmer. There was a faint draft in the wide, low-ceilinged corridor. The strips of paper across the air vents were fluttering furiously. The door of the main lab consisted of a thick plate of textured glass in a metal frame. The glass had been covered with something dark from inside; light issued only from a narrow window beneath the ceiling. I pressed on the bar. As I had expected, the door did not yield. Inside there was silence, broken from time to time by what sounded like the low hiss of a Bunsen burner. I knocked. There was no response.

"Sartorius!" I called out. "Dr. Sartorius! It's me, Kelvin, the new

arrival! I have to see you. Open up, please!”

There was a soft rustle, like someone walking on crumpled papers, then silence again.

“It’s me, Kelvin! You must have heard about me! I arrived a few hours ago from the *Prometheus*!” I said loudly, positioning my mouth close to the place where the metal door frame met the jamb. “Dr. Sartorius! There’s no one else here, only me! Please open up.”

Silence. Then the faint rustle again. A few clinking sounds, very distinct, as if someone were placing metal implements on a metal tray. Then suddenly I was thunderstruck. There came a series of tiny footsteps, like the toddling of a small child—a rapid, hurried patter of small feet. Perhaps. . . perhaps someone was just imitating it, masterfully drumming their fingers on an empty box.

“Dr. Sartorius!!” I yelled. “Are you going to open the door or not?!”

There was no response, only that childlike pattering again, and at the same time a few rapid, barely audible, long steps, as if the person were walking on tiptoe. But if he was walking, surely he couldn’t simultaneously imitate a child’s footsteps? Though what did I care, I thought to myself, and no longer holding back the anger that was building up in me I roared:

“Dr. Sartorius!! I haven’t been traveling for sixteen months just to be brought to a halt by some playacting of yours!! I’m counting to ten. Then I’m going to break down the door!!”

I doubted it would work.

Gas pistols aren’t very powerful, but I was determined to carry out my threat one way or another, even if it meant looking for explosives, which for sure would be plentifully available in the depository. I told myself I mustn’t give in. In other words I mustn’t keep playing with these cards, marked with madness, that the situation had stuck in my hand.

There was a noise that sounded like someone wrestling with someone else, or pushing something. The dark sheet covering the inside of the door moved aside a foot and a half or so; a slender shadow appeared in the lusterless frosted pane, and a slightly hoarse, high-pitched voice said:

“I’ll open the door, but you have to give me your word you’ll not come in.”

“Then why open it?” I thundered.

“I’ll come out to you.”

“All right. You have my word.”

There was the faint click of a key turning in the lock. Then the

dark silhouette covering half the door carefully pulled the cover back in place. Some kind of complicated maneuvers were carried out inside—I heard what sounded like the creak of a wooden table being moved—then finally the door opened just enough to allow Sartorius to slip out into the corridor. He stood before me, shielding the door with his body. He was extremely tall and thin; under his cream-colored undershirt his body looked to be nothing but bones. He wore a black scarf around his neck; a folded lab coat dotted with reagent burns was draped over his arm. His narrow head was tilted to the side. Almost half his face was hidden behind a pair of wrap-around black glasses, so I couldn't see his eyes. He had a long lower jaw, blueish lips, and huge ears that were also blue and looked frostbitten. He was unshaven. Red rubber anti-radiation gloves hung from his wrists on loops. We stood for a moment, eyeing each other with unconcealed animosity. What was left of his hair (he looked as if he'd given himself a buzzcut) was the color of lead, while his beard was completely gray. His forehead was sunburned, like Snaut's, but the color ended at a horizontal line halfway to his hairline. He'd evidently worn some kind of cap the whole time he was in the sun.

"How can I help you?" he said finally. I had the impression he wasn't waiting to see what I would say, so much as listening closely to the space behind him, his back pressed up the whole time against the glass pane of the door. For a good while I couldn't think of how to open without sounding foolish.

"My name is Kelvin. . . you must have heard about me," I began. "I am, or rather, I was, Gibarian's colleague. . ."

His skinny face, crisscrossed with horizontal lines—this was what Don Quixote must have looked like—was expressionless. The bulging black surface of the dark glasses directed towards me made it extremely hard for me to talk.

"I heard that Gibarian. . . passed away." I paused.

"Yes. How can I help?"

He sounded impatient.

"Did he commit suicide? Who found the body, doctor—you or Snaut?"

"Why are you asking me? Did Dr. Snaut not tell you. . . ?"

"I'd like to hear what you have to say about the matter. . ."

"You're a psychologist, Dr. Kelvin?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"A scholar?"

"Well, yes. What relevance does that have—"

"I thought perhaps you were a detective or a police officer. It's

two forty, and you, Dr. Kelvin—instead of seeking to familiarize yourself with the work being conducted on the Station, which would after all be understandable despite your brutal attempt to break into the laboratory—you're questioning me as if I were at the very least a suspect."

I controlled myself, though the effort brought beads of sweat to my forehead.

"You *are* a suspect, Sartorius!" I said through clenched teeth.

I wanted to needle him at any cost, and so I added unrelentingly:

"As you're perfectly well aware!"

"If you do not retract that remark and apologize, Kelvin, I shall bring a complaint against you in my next radio report!"

"What am I supposed to apologize for? For the fact that, instead of welcoming me, instead of properly briefing me on what's been happening, you lock the door and barricade yourself in the laboratory? Have you completely lost your mind?! Are you a scientist or a coward?! Eh? What do you have to say for yourself?!" I don't know exactly what else I said. He didn't even flinch. Thick beads of perspiration were trickling down his pale large-pored face. All at once I realized he wasn't even listening to me. He kept both his hands behind him, with all his strength holding the door shut. It was shuddering slightly, as if someone were pushing on it from the other side.

"You. . . should. . . go," he whined suddenly in a strange shrill voice. "You should. . . for the love of God! Go now! Go downstairs, I'll come, I'll come down, I'll do whatever you want, but please go!!"

There was such torment in his voice that, in a state of bewilderment, instinctively I raised my hand to try and help him keep the door shut, because that was evidently what he was struggling with. But he gave a fearful cry, as if I'd threatened him with a knife, so I began to back away. He kept shouting in that high voice: "Go! Go!" and then: "I'm coming back! I'll be back right away!! No! No!!"

He cracked open the door and darted inside. I thought I caught a glimpse of something gold-colored, like a shiny disk, at the level of his chest. There now came a muffled commotion from inside. The cover over the door was knocked aside, a large tall shadow flashed across the pane, the cover was put back in place and nothing more could be seen. What on earth was happening in there? There was the sound of footsteps, the crazy ruckus broke off with a terrifying clatter of glass, and I heard a burst of laughter from a child. . .

My legs were shaking. I looked around me. Everything fell silent. I perched on a low plastic windowsill. I sat there for perhaps fifteen minutes; I couldn't say if I was waiting for something or had simply

been brought to such a pass that I didn't even have it in me to stand. My head was splitting. Somewhere high up I heard a prolonged grinding sound and at the same time the place grew lighter.

From where I sat I could see only part of the circular corridor that ran around the laboratory. It was located at the very top of the Station, right under the exterior armor plating. For this reason the outside walls were concave and sloping, with windows like loop-holes set into them every few yards. The external shades were just retracting, as the blue day was drawing to a close. A blinding glare burst through the thick glass. Every nickel-plated piece of trim, every door handle burned like a little sun. The lab door with its pane of rough glass glowed like the opening of a furnace. I looked at my hands, which lay in my lap and had turned gray in this ghastly light. In the right I was holding the gas pistol. I had no clue when or how I'd taken it out of its holster. I put it back. I knew by now that even an atomic blaster would be no use. What could I do with one? Break down the door? Force my way into the lab?

I stood up. The disk descending into the ocean, looking like a hydrogen explosion, sent a cluster of almost material horizontal rays in my direction; when they struck my cheek (I was already walking down the stairs) it felt like a red-hot brand.

Halfway down the steps I changed my mind and went back up. I circled the lab. As I mentioned, the corridor ran all the way around it. After a hundred yards or so I found myself on its far side, outside an identical glass door. I didn't even try to open it. I knew it would be locked.

I looked for some kind of window in the plastic wall, even just a chink; the idea of spying on Sartorius didn't seem at all dishonorable to me. I wanted to put an end to conjecture and learn the truth, though I couldn't imagine how I would understand it.

It occurred to me that the labs were lit from skylights in the ceiling, or rather in the exterior plating, and if I went outside I might be able to see in from there. To this end I'd need to go downstairs and get a space suit and oxygen tank. I stood by the stairs, wondering if it was worth the effort. The skylights were likely made of matted glass. But what other option did I have? I went down to the middle level. I had to pass by the radio station. The door was wide open. He was sitting in the armchair, in the same position I'd left him in. He was asleep. At the sound of my footsteps he stirred and opened his eyes.

"Hey there, Kelvin," he croaked. I remained silent. "So did you find anything out?" he asked.

"Actually yes," I replied slowly. "He's not alone."

Snaut made a face.

“How about that. That’s something. He has guests, you say?”

“I don’t understand why none of you will say what it is,” I put in as if casually. “I mean, I’ll be staying here so sooner or later I’ll find out anyway. So why all the secrets?”

“You’ll understand when you have your own guests,” he said. I had the feeling he was waiting for something and wasn’t in the mood to talk.

“Where are you going?” he asked sharply when I turned around. I didn’t reply. The docking bay was in the same state as when I’d left it earlier. My scorched capsule stood wide open on the pad. I went up to the spacesuit racks, but I’d suddenly lost interest in the idea of venturing out to the plating atop the Station. I spun on my heel and went down the spiral stairs to where the depositories were. The narrow corridor was cluttered with canisters and piles of cases. The walls here were made of bare metal that glinted lividly in the light. A few dozen yards and the frost-covered pipes of the cooling apparatus came into view beneath the ceiling. I traced them back. They disappeared via a thick plastic sleeve into a hermetically sealed room. When I opened the heavy door, which was two hand-widths thick and lined with rubber, a blast of cold chilled me to the bone. I shivered. Icicles hung from a tangle of snow-coated coils. Here too there were crates and capsules, under a thin layer of snow; the shelves lining the walls were stacked with cans and yellow blocks of some kind of fat packed in clear plastic. Further off, the barrel-vaulted ceiling dropped lower. In this place there was a thick curtain glittering with ice needles. I pulled it aside. A large elongated shape lay on a pallet beneath a sheet of gray fabric. I raised the hem and looked into the stiffened face of Gibarian. His black hair, with the gray streak over the forehead, lay flat against his skull. His Adam’s apple jutted upwards, breaking the line of his neck. His dry eyes stared straight up at the ceiling; a cloudy tear of ice had formed in the corner of his eyelid. The cold was so piercing I had trouble preventing my teeth from chattering. Holding the shroud up, with my other hand I touched his cheek. It was exactly like touching frozen wood. The skin was rough with stubble, which poked through in small black points. An expression of boundless disdainful patience had set on his lips. As I lowered the edge of the cloth, I noticed that on the far side of the body some elongated black beads or beans, arranged from smallest to largest, were poking out from under the folds. All at once I was petrified.

It was the toes of bare feet seen from underneath. The oval pads protruded somewhat. Beneath the crumpled edge of the shroud, pressed flat against the pallet, lay the black woman.

She was face down, as if plunged in a deep sleep. I pulled aside the sheet inch by inch. Her head, covered in small tufts of bluish hair, rested in the crook of her massive, equally black arm. The bumps of her spinal column tightened the glistening skin across her back. Her immense body showed not the slightest sign of movement. Once again I looked at the bottoms of her bare feet and I was struck by something odd: they weren't flattened or squashed by the weight they must have had to carry; they weren't even callused from walking barefoot, but were covered with a skin that was as thin as that on her back or hands.

I tested this impression with a touch that was much more difficult than touching the dead body. What happened then was quite incredible: her body, subjected to a temperature below zero degrees Fahrenheit, came to life and stirred. She drew up her foot like a sleeping dog when you take hold of its paw.

She'll freeze to death in here, I thought to myself. But her body was tranquil and not especially cold. I could still feel the soft touch moving through my fingertips. I stepped back behind the curtain, let it fall, and returned to the corridor. It felt extraordinarily hot out there. Stairs led me out to right by the docking bay. I sat on a furled parachute and took my head in my hands. I felt as if I'd been beaten up. I didn't know what was happening to me. I was shattered. My thoughts seemed to be moving along the edge of a cliff, in danger of falling off at any moment—annihilation or at least loss of consciousness would have been a unutterable, unattainable act of grace.

I had no reason to go see Snaut or Sartorius; I couldn't imagine assembling into any kind of whole all I'd experienced, seen, touched with my own hands up to this point. The only resort, way out, explanation, was a diagnosis of insanity. Yes: I must have gone mad, immediately after I landed. The ocean had affected my brain in such a way—I'd had one hallucination after another, and since this was the case, there was no point in wasting my energy on vain attempts to solve mysteries that in reality did not exist, but instead I should seek medical assistance, call the *Prometheus* or another ship from the radio station, send an SOS.

At this point something happened that I scarcely expected: the thought that I had lost my mind calmed me down.

I understood only too well what Snaut had said—if in fact anyone called Snaut even existed, and I had ever spoken to him, because after all, the hallucinations could have begun much earlier. Who knows if I wasn't still on board the *Prometheus*, struck down by a sudden bout of mental illness, and everything I'd experienced to this point was the

product of a disturbed mind? Yet if I was sick I could get better, and that at least gave me the hope of deliverance, something I couldn't remotely see being possible among the tangled nightmares of what I'd lived through on Solaris in the space of a few short hours.

What I needed to do, then, was to conduct some kind of logically designed experiment on myself—an *experimentum crucis*—which would show me whether in fact I'd gone mad and was at the mercy of phantoms created by my own imagination, or whether, however absurd and improbable they were, these experiences were in fact real.

I thought about it all as I gazed at the metal cantilever that supported the weight-bearing structure of the docking bay. It took the form of a steel mast jutting from the wall and reinforced with convex plates. It was painted willow green. In places, at a height of about three feet, the paint was coming off; it had probably been scraped by the rocket carts as they were moved that way. I touched the steel, warming it for a moment with my hand, and tapped the rolled edge of the protective casing. Was it possible for a hallucination to reach such a level of realism? Perhaps, I answered myself. After all, that was my area of specialization; I knew what I was talking about.

But could such a critical experiment be designed? To begin with I thought not, because my sick brain (if indeed it was sick) would produce any illusion I required of it. After all, it's not just in sickness; even in the most ordinary dream we find ourselves conversing with people we do not know in our waking life, asking these dream figures questions and hearing their answers. When this happens, even though the figures are in fact only products of our own mind, parts of which have temporarily become detached and given a fake independence, we still don't know what words they will utter until, in that dream, they speak to us. Yet in reality the words are concocted by that other, separated part of our own mind, and so we ought to know them at the moment we think them up and put them in the mouth of a fictional character. Whatever I might plan and carry out, then, I could always tell myself I was acting the way we act in dreams. Neither Snaut nor Sartorius needed to even exist in reality, and so asking either of them questions was pointless.

It occurred to me that I could take some powerful medication, like peyote for example, or something else that produces hallucinations or graphic visions. Experiencing such things would prove that what I had taken really existed and was a part of the material reality surrounding me. But, I thought further, that too would not be the critical experiment I was after, because I knew how the substance (which I of course would have to select) *ought* to act on me, and so it could also be the case that both the taking of the medication and the effects it caused were equally products of my imagination.

I was already thinking there was no way out of the vicious circle of madness—after all, no one can think with anything but his brain, no one can be outside himself to check whether the processes taking place in his body are normal. Then suddenly I was struck by an idea that was as simple as it was apt.

I jumped up from the pile of parachutes and ran straight to the radio station. It was empty. I glanced at the electric wall clock. It was coming up to four in the agreed-upon night of the Station, because outside a red dawn was breaking. I quickly turned on the long-distance radio equipment, and as I waited for the lamps to warm up, in my mind I went over the various stages of the experiment.

I couldn't remember the call signal for the automatic station of the planetary Satelloid, but I found it on the bulletin board over the main console. I called it up in Morse code; eight seconds later came the response. The Satelloid, or rather its electronic brain, reported in with a repeated rhythmic signal.

I requested it to tell me which meridians of the galactic canopy it was passing at twenty-second intervals as it orbited Solaris. I asked for figures to the fifth decimal place.

Then I sat down and waited for the response. It came ten minutes later. I tore off the paper printout with the results, stuck it in a drawer (making sure I didn't so much as glance at it first), then went to the library and brought back large-scale sky maps, logarithmic tables, the almanac of the satellite's daily movements, and a few additional books. I then proceeded to figure out my own answer to the same question. It took me almost an hour to set up the equations. I don't remember the last time I performed such difficult computations—it was probably in school, during my practical astronomy exam.

I carried out the work on the Station's huge calculator. My reasoning was as follows: from the sky maps I ought to derive figures that were not exactly the same as those provided by the Satelloid, since the Satelloid was subject to complex perturbations as a result of Solaris's gravitational pull, of its two mutually orbiting suns, and also local variations in gravitation caused by the ocean. When I had both sets of figures, those provided by the Satelloid and those calculated theoretically on the basis of the sky maps, I'd correct my own reckonings. At this point the two groups of results ought to match to the fourth decimal place; discrepancies would remain only in the fifth decimal place, as being caused by the unpredictable influence of the ocean.

Even if the figures the Satelloid provided were not real but a product of my own crazy mind, they still couldn't match the other series of numbers—even if my brain was sick, it would not be capable

under any circumstances of the computations performed by the Station's calculator. Such a thing would have required months of work. So then, if the figures tallied, the calculator existed in reality and I was actually using it, not just imagining I was.

My hands were trembling as I took the telegraphic printout from the drawer and spread it out next to the other, wider sheet from the calculator. Both lists of figures matched as I had predicted, to the fourth decimal place. Discrepancies appeared only in the fifth.

I put all the papers into the drawer. So the calculator existed independently of me; this meant that the Station and everything on it was also real.

I was about to close the drawer when I noticed it was filled with a whole wad of papers covered in hasty calculations. I pulled them out; a single glance was enough to see that someone else had already carried out an experiment like mine, the only difference being that instead of data from the star canopy this person had asked the Satelloid for information about Solaris's reflectivity at forty-second intervals.

I was not mad. The last ray of hope had faded. I turned off the transmitter, finished what was left of the bouillon in the flask, and went to bed.

I'd carried out my calculations in a kind of silent doggedness that had been the only thing keeping me on my feet. I was so dazed by exhaustion that I couldn't figure out how to set up the bunk in the cabin; instead of releasing the top latches I just pulled on the rail, and all the bedding fell on me. When I finally got it down, I tossed my clothes and underwear on the floor and, barely conscious, dropped onto the pillow, which I hadn't even properly inflated. I don't know when I fell asleep; the light was still on. When I opened my eyes I had the feeling I'd only been sleeping a few minutes. The room was filled with a cloudy red glow. I felt cold and I felt fine. I lay naked outside the covers. Across from the bed, by the window, which was half covered by the shades, someone was sitting in the light of the red sun. It was Harey, in a white summer dress. Her legs were crossed, she was barefoot, her dark hair was tied back; the sheer material was taut over her breasts. Her dangling arms were tanned to the elbows; she sat motionless, looking at me from under dark eyelashes. I gazed at her for a long time, entirely calm. My first thought was: "I'm glad this is one of those dreams where you know you're dreaming." All the same, I'd have preferred her not to be there. I closed my eyes and began to wish this intensely, but when I opened them again she was still sitting there. Her mouth was set in the way it always used to be, as if she was about to whistle, but her eyes weren't smiling in the slightest. I recalled everything I'd been thinking about dreams the previous evening before I fell asleep. She looked exactly like she had the last time I saw her alive. At that time she'd only been nineteen years old; today she would have been twenty-nine, but naturally she hadn't altered—the dead remain young. She had the same eyes that were surprised at everything, and she was looking at me. I'll throw something at her, I thought, but though it was only a dream, I somehow couldn't bring myself to throw objects at a dead woman.

"You poor little thing," I said. "You've come to visit me, huh?"

I got a little scared, because my voice sounded normal, and the whole room and Harey—it all looked as real as could be imagined.

The dream was so vivid—not only was it in color, on the floor I could also see a number of objects that I hadn't even noticed as I went to bed. When I wake up, I thought, I'll have to check whether they're actually there or whether they're a creation of my dream, like Harey. .

"Are you going to be sitting there much longer?" I asked, and I noticed I was speaking softly, like I was afraid someone might hear me—as if anyone could hear what happens in a dream!

In the meantime the red sun had risen a little higher. Even that much is good, I thought. I went to sleep during the red day, now it ought to be blue, and only after that would come the next red day. I couldn't possibly have slept for fifteen hours straight, so this was definitely a dream!

Reassured, I studied Harey closely. She was lit from behind; a ray of light coming through a crack in the curtains gilded the velvety down on her left cheek, and her eyelashes cast a long shadow on her face. She was lovely. How about that, I thought to myself, how exact I am even when I'm not awake: I check the movement of the sun, and make sure she has that dimple of hers where nobody else has one, under the corner of her perpetually surprised mouth. All the same, I wished it would end. I need to get to work, after all. So I squeezed my eyelids shut, trying to wake up, when suddenly I heard a creak. I opened my eyes at once. She was sitting next to me on the bed, staring at me gravely. I smiled at her and she smiled back and leaned over me; the first kiss was a light one, like one small child kissing another. I gave her a lingering kiss in return. Can a dream be exploited like that? I wondered. Though it's not even betraying her memory, because after all it was she herself I was dreaming about. This had never happened to me before. . . Still we said nothing. I lay on my back; when she raised her face I could see into her small nostrils, lit by the sun from the direction of the window, which were always a barometer of her feelings. I passed my fingertips over her ears, whose lobes had turned pink from kisses. I don't know if that was what unsettled me so; I kept telling myself it was a dream, but my heart contracted.

I gathered myself to jump out of bed. I was expecting not to succeed; in dreams you often have no control over your own body, which seems paralyzed or somehow absent. I was rather counting on being woken up by the attempt. Yet I didn't wake. I just sat up with my legs hanging to the floor. Nothing for it, I'd just have to dream this dream to the end, I thought to myself, but my good mood had vanished without a trace. I was afraid.

"What is it you want?" I asked. My voice was hoarse and I had to clear my throat.

Unthinkingly my bare feet sought my slippers and before I remembered I didn't have any slippers here, I stubbed my toe so hard I winced. All right, now it's going to come to an end! I thought gladly.

But still nothing happened. Harey had moved aside when I sat up. She leaned back against the bedrail. Her dress was trembling slightly just beneath the tip of her left breast, to the rhythm of a beating heart. She gazed at me with tranquil interest. It occurred to me that the best

thing would be to take a shower, but on second thought I realized a dream shower wouldn't wake me up.

"Where did you come from?" I asked.

She took hold of my hand and started tossing it up and down the way she used to, knocking my fingertips up then catching hold of them.

"I don't know," she said. "Is that bad?"

It was the same low voice, and the same absent-minded tone. She always spoke as if she was paying little attention to the words she was uttering, as if she was already occupied with something else. Sometimes this made her seem giddy, sometimes shameless, because she would stare at everything with a muted astonishment expressed only in her eyes.

"Has anyone. . . seen you?"

"I don't know. I came here, that's all. Does it matter, Kris?"

She was still playing with my hand, but her face was no longer taking part in the game. She frowned.

"Harey?"

"What is it, love?"

"How did you know where I was?"

That made her think. When she smiled—her lips were so dark that when she ate sour cherries you couldn't tell—she showed the tips of her teeth.

"I've no idea. Isn't that funny? You were asleep when I came in, but I didn't wake you up. I tried not to, because you get grumpy. Grumpy and whiny," she said, bouncing my hand up energetically to the rhythm of her words.

"Were you down below?"

"Yes. I left—it's cold there."

She let go of my hand. Lying down, she tossed her head back so all her hair spilled to one side, and she glanced at me with the half-smile that only had stopped irritating me when I fell in love with her.

"But. . . Harey. . . But—" I stammered.

I leaned towards her and raised the short sleeve of her dress. Just above the flower-shaped smallpox inoculation there was a tiny red pinprick. Though I'd suspected this (I was still instinctively seeking scraps of logic among all the impossibilities), I suddenly felt faint. I placed my finger on the injection mark, which I'd dreamed of for years afterwards: I would wake up with a groan in crumpled bedding, always in the same position, folded almost in two, the way she had been lying when I found her almost completely cold—because in my dream I'd tried to do the same thing she had done, as if in this way I'd

been seeking her forgiveness or keeping her company in those last minutes, when she could already feel the effects of the injection and had begun to be afraid. After all, she was afraid even of an ordinary cut. She never could stand pain or the sight of blood, and then all at once she'd gone and done such a terrible thing, leaving five words on a note card addressed to me. I had it among my papers. I carried it with me at all times, faded and falling apart at the folds; I lacked the courage to part with it. A thousand times I'd returned to the moment when she wrote it, and to what she must have been feeling then. I tried to convince myself she'd only meant to pretend to do it to scare me, and it was just that the dose had accidentally proved too big. Everyone tried to tell me that was how it had been, or that it had been a momentary decision brought on by sudden depression. But they didn't know what I had said to her five days earlier, or that I'd packed my things so as to hurt her as much as possible, and that as I was getting everything together she had said entirely calmly: "You do know what this means. . . ?", and I'd pretended I didn't understand, though I understood perfectly well. It's just that I thought she was a coward, and I told her that as well. And now she was lying across my bed and gazing at me as if she didn't know I had killed her.

"Is that all you can manage?" she asked. The room was red from the sun, the glow smoldered in her hair. She looked at her own arm, it had suddenly become important because I'd been staring at it, and when I lowered my hand she placed a cool, soft cheek against it.

"Harey," I said hoarsely, "this can't be. . ."

"Stop it!"

Her eyes were closed; I could see them quivering under tightly shut eyelids. Her dark lashes touched her cheeks.

"Where are we, Harey?"

"At home."

"Which is where?"

She opened one eye for a moment then shut it again immediately. Her eyelashes tickled my hand.

"Kris!"

"What?"

"I feel good."

I sat over her without moving. I raised my head and in the mirror over the washbasin I saw part of the bunk, Harey's ruffled hair, and my bare knees. With my foot I pulled up one of those half-melted tools lying around on the floor, and picked it up with my free hand. Its tip was sharp. I held it against my skin right above the place where there was a pink, semi-circular, symmetrical scar, and I pressed it into my

body. The pain was acute. I watched the blood flow in large drops down the inside of my thigh and drip quietly onto the floor.

It wasn't working. The terrible thoughts moving through my mind were growing more and more distinct. I'd stopped saying "this is a dream," I'd long stopped believing it. Now I was thinking, "I have to protect myself." I glanced at her back, where it turned into the curve of her hips beneath the white fabric. Her bare feet dangled above the floor. I reached toward them, gently took hold of her pink heel and moved my fingers across the sole.

It was soft as the skin of a new-born baby.

By now I pretty much knew it wasn't Harey; and I was almost certain she herself didn't know it.

The bare foot twisted in my hand, and Harey's dark lips filled with laughter without making a sound.

"Stop it," she whispered.

I eased my hand away and stood up. I was still naked. As I dressed hurriedly I saw her sit on the bunk. She was watching me.

"Where are your things?" I asked, and regretted it immediately.

"My things?"

"You mean you only have that dress?"

By this stage I was just putting on an act. I deliberately tried to sound casual, ordinary, as if we'd just parted the day before or, rather, as if we'd never parted at all. She stood up and with the light but firm gesture I knew so well she brushed her dress to straighten it out. My words had intrigued her, though she didn't say anything. For the first time she took a long hard look at her surroundings, then she looked back at me, visibly surprised.

"I don't know. . . ,” she said helplessly. "Maybe in the locker?" she added and opened the door.

"No, there's nothing but overalls in there," I replied. I found an electric razor by the washbasin and began shaving. As I did so I tried not to stand with my back to the girl, whoever she was.

She walked around the cabin, peering into every corner, looking out of the window; in the end she came up to me and said:

"Kris, I have the feeling that something has happened?"

She broke off. I waited, the turned-off razor in my hand.

"It's as if I'd forgotten something. . . As if I'd forgotten a great deal. I know. . . I only remember you. . . and. . . and nothing else."

I listened, trying to control the look on my face.

"Was I. . . sick?"

"Well. . . you could put it like that. Yes, for a while you were a bit

sick.”

“Oh. Then that’s probably what it is.”

She was already in better spirits. I can’t express what I was going through. As she stood there silently, walked around, sat, smiled, the feeling that this was Harey in front of me was stronger than my churning fear; then at other moments, like the present one, it seemed as if this was a simplified version of Harey, reduced to a few distinctive expressions, gestures, movements. She came close, rested her fists on my chest by my neck and asked:

“How are things between us? Good or bad?”

“They couldn’t be better,” I replied.

She gave a half-smile.

“When you say that, it usually means they’re bad.”

“Not at all. Harey darling, I have to go now,” I said hurriedly. “Wait for me here, OK? Or maybe. . . are you hungry?” I asked, because I myself suddenly felt a growing hunger.

“Hungry? No.”

She shook her head so hard it made her hair wave back and forth.

“Should I wait here for you? Will you be long?”

“An hour tops,” I began, but she interrupted:

“I’ll go with you.”

“You can’t go with me. I have work to get done.”

“I’ll go with you.”

This was a completely different Harey—the old one didn’t intrude. Ever.

“It isn’t possible, kid. . .”

She looked up at me, then all at once took me by the hand. I ran my fingers up her forearm; the upper arm was full and warm. I hadn’t meant it but it was almost a caress. My body was acknowledging her, wanting her, drawing me to her beyond reason, beyond argumentation and fear.

Trying to remain calm come what may, I repeated:

“Harey, it isn’t possible. You have to stay here.”

“No.”

How strange it sounded!

“Why?”

“I d. . . I don’t know.”

She looked around and raised her eyes to me again.

“I can’t,” she said as quiet as could be.

“But why?!”

"I don't know. I can't. I have the feeling that. . . the feeling that. . ."

She was evidently searching for the answer inside herself, and when she found it, it was a discovery for her.

"I have the feeling that I always have to. . . be able to see you."

Her matter-of-fact tone prevented the words from being an expression of emotion; this was something quite different. It suddenly altered the way I was holding her—though on the outside there was no change, I still had my arms around her. As I looked into her eyes I began to push her arms backwards. This movement, not entirely decisive to begin with, was already leading somewhere—it had found its purpose. I cast around with my eyes for something to tie her up with.

Her elbows, twisted back, knocked lightly against each other and at the same moment flexed with a strength that rendered my hold ineffective. I struggled for perhaps one second. Not even a wrestler would have been able to get free if he'd been bent over backwards as Harey was, feet barely touching the floor; but she broke my grip, straightened up and lowered her arms, while her face took no part in any of this, bearing nothing but a faint, uncertain smile.

Her eyes observed me with the same calm interest as at the very beginning, when I woke up, as if she was unaware of my desperate exertions from a moment ago, brought on by an attack of anxiety. She'd become passive and seemed to be waiting for something—simultaneously indifferent, intent, and a little take aback by it all.

My arms dropped of their own accord. I left her in the middle of the room and went up to the shelf by the washbasin. I felt caught in an unimaginable trap, and I was looking for a way out, weighing ever more ruthless options. If someone had asked what was happening to me and what it all meant, I wouldn't have been able to respond with a single word, but I was already becoming aware that what was happening to all of us on the Station constituted some kind of whole, as dire as it was incomprehensible. Yet this was not what I was thinking about at the present moment. Rather, I was looking for some sort of trick, a maneuver that would make it possible for me to escape. Without looking, I could feel Harey's gaze on me. In a locker over the shelf there was a small first aid box. I flipped through its contents. I found a container of soluble sleeping tablets and put four of them—the maximum dose—in a glass. I didn't even particularly conceal what I was doing from her. I don't really know why. I didn't think about it. I added hot water, waited till the tablets had dissolved, and went up to Harey, who was still standing in the middle of the room.

"Are you angry?" she asked in a low voice.

“No. Here, drink this.”

I don't know why I'd assumed she would do what I said. But sure enough, she took the glass from me without a word and drank the whole thing in one gulp. I set the empty glass aside on the table and sat down in the corner between the locker and the bookshelves. Harey slowly came up to me and sat down on the floor by the armchair, the way she often used to, folding her legs under her, and with an equally familiar gesture she tossed her hair back. Though I no longer remotely believed it was her, every time I recognized her in these small quirks my throat tightened. It was beyond understanding and it was terrible, and the most terrible thing about it was that I myself had to dissemble, pretending that I took her for Harey; though after all, she took herself for Harey too, and in her own reasoning she was not being deceitful. I don't know how I concluded that this was the case, but I was sure of it, insofar as anything could still be sure.

I sat there, and the girl leaned back against my knees, her hair tickling my motionless hand. We were almost completely still. A couple of times I glanced at my watch. Half an hour had passed and the sleeping tablets ought to have started working. Harey murmured something faintly.

“What was that?” I asked, but she didn't reply. I took this as a sign she was growing sleepy, though truth be told, deep down I doubted whether the medication would be effective. Why? I don't know the answer to that question either, probably because my ruse had been only too simple.

Her head, swathed in dark hair, gradually sank onto my lap; she was breathing regularly like a sleeping person. I leaned over to carry her across to the bunk; suddenly, without opening her eyes she took hold of my hair lightly and burst out in a strident laugh.

I froze, while she was in fits of laughter. Through eyes narrowed to slits she studied me with a gaze that was at once naive and cunning. I sat unnaturally stiffly, dazed and helpless; Harey giggled one more time, pressed her face into my arm and fell silent.

“What are you laughing about?” I asked in a hollow voice. The same expression of slightly uneasy puzzlement appeared on her face. I knew she was trying to give a straight answer. She tapped her diminutive nose and finally said with a sigh:

“I couldn't say myself.”

It sounded like genuine surprise.

“I'm behaving like an idiot, aren't I?” she continued. “It just kind of suddenly. . . But you're no one to talk: you're sitting there all sulky like. . . like Pelvis. . .”

“Like *who*?” I asked. I thought I'd misheard.

“Pelvis. You know, the fat guy. . .”

The thing was, beyond the shadow of a doubt Harey could not have known Pelvis or heard about him from me, for the simple reason that he'd come back from his mission a good three years after she died. I'd never met him up till then, and I didn't know that when he presided over Institute meetings he had the annoying habit of prolonging them into infinity. In fact his name was Pelle Villis, which had been shortened to Pelvis as a nickname, something I also didn't know till he returned.

Harey leaned her elbows on my lap and looked into my face. I placed my hands on her shoulders and slid them towards her back till they almost met at the pulsing, bare base of her neck. The gesture could actually have been taken for a caress, and judging from her eyes she hadn't understood it any other way. In reality I was checking that her body felt like ordinary, soft human flesh, and that beneath her muscles there were bones and joints. As I gazed into her tranquil eyes I had an awful urge to tighten my fingers abruptly.

I was on the point of squeezing when I suddenly remembered Snaut's bloodied hands, and I let go of her.

“What a strange look you have in your eyes. . . ,” she said evenly.

My heart was pounding so hard I couldn't say a word. I closed my eyes for a moment.

All at once an entire course of action came to me, from beginning to end, with all the details. Without wasting a moment I stood up from the armchair.

“I have to go now, Harey,” I said. “If you really want, you can come with me.”

“All right.”

She jumped to her feet.

“Why are you barefoot?” I asked, going up to the locker and picking out two pairs of colored overalls for myself and for her.

“I don't know. . . I must have kicked my shoes off somewhere. . . ,” she said hesitantly. I let it slide.

“You won't be able to put this on over your dress—you'll need to take it off.”

“Overalls? What for?” she asked. She immediately made to remove her dress, but something very odd came to light: it couldn't be taken off because there was no fastening. The red buttons down the middle were only decoration. There was no zipper or any other kind of fastener. Harey gave an embarrassed smile. Acting as if it were the most natural thing in the world, I picked up a scalpel-like tool from the floor and cut the material in the middle of the neckline at the

back. Now she could pull the dress over her head. The overalls were a little too big for her.

“Are we flying somewhere? . . . But you’re coming too?” she asked as we were leaving the cabin, both in our overalls now. I merely nodded. I was terrified we’d meet Snaut, but the corridor to the docking bay was deserted, and the door to the radio station, which we had to pass, was closed.

A dead calm hung over the Station. Harey watched as I brought a rocket from the middle cubicle on an electric cart and drove it onto a free track. I checked in turn the microreactor, the remote controlled rudders, and the nozzles; then along with the takeoff carriage I wheeled the missile onto the circular roller surface of the launch pad beneath the central funnel of the dome, having first removed the empty capsule that was there.

The rocket was a small vessel that served as a shuttle between the Station and the Satelloid. It was used to transport cargo, not people, barring exceptional circumstances, because it couldn’t be opened from inside. This happened to suit my purpose and was a part of my plan. Of course I had no intention of launching the rocket, but I did everything the way I would if I were preparing it for an actual takeoff. Harey, who had accompanied me so many times on my travels, was somewhat familiar with it all. Once again I checked the air conditioning and the breathing apparatus inside and turned them both on; then when I fired up the main circuit and the control lights came on, I crawled out of the cramped interior and indicated it to Harey, who was standing by the access ladder.

“Get in.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll follow you. I have to close the hatch behind us.”

I didn’t think she could have seen through the deception ahead of time. When she climbed the ladder and entered the vessel, I immediately stuck my head through the hatch and asked if she’d been able to find a comfortable position. When I heard a muffled “yes” from the cramped space, I stepped back and slammed the trapdoor shut. With a flick of the hand I snapped the bolts shut as far as they would go and with a wrench I had ready I started tightening the five reinforcing screws set into wells in the plating.

The sharpened cigar of the rocket stood upright as if it were actually about to fly off into space. I knew nothing bad would happen to the woman locked inside—there was plenty of air, even some food, and besides, I had no intention of imprisoning her in there forever.

I wanted at any price to buy myself a few hours of freedom so I could make plans for the less immediate future, and get in touch with

Snaut, now on an equal basis.

As I was tightening the second-to-last screw I felt a slight shake in the metal struts that held the rocket in place, suspended from projections on three sides, but I thought I must have set the steel mass atremble myself as I wielded the large wrench.

Yet when I took a few steps away I saw something I hope never to see again.

The whole rocket was juddering from a series of blows coming from inside. But the strength of those blows. . . Even if the slim dark-haired girl inside the vessel had been replaced by a steel automat, it wouldn't have been able to make the entire eight tons convulse in that way!

The reflections of the docking bay lights flickered and flashed in the polished bodywork. In fact I didn't hear any knocking. Inside the projectile there was undisturbed quiet; but the broadly planted stays of the scaffolding in which the rocket was suspended lost their sharp outline, quivering like violin strings. The frequency of the vibrations was such that I worried about the integrity of the plating. With shaking hands I finished securing the last screw, tossed the wrench aside and jumped down off the ladder. As I stepped slowly backwards I could see the bolts in the shock absorbers, designed only to withstand a constant pressure, bouncing in their mounts. I had the impression the plating of the hull was losing its uniform gleam. Like a madman I rushed to the remote control console and with both hands pushed the lever that started up the reactor and the communications system. At that point, from the loudspeaker now connected to the rocket's interior there came a half-whimper, half-whistle that was utterly unlike any human voice, despite which I could make out in it a repeated howl: "Kris! Kris! Kris!!"

Though actually I didn't hear it clearly. My knuckles were cut and bleeding from the helter-skelter of trying to launch the rocket. A pale blue glow lit the walls. Dust clouds burst from the launch pad beneath the exhaust nozzles and turned into a pillar of toxic sparks, then a sustained roar drowned out all other sounds. The rocket rose up on three flames that instantly merged into a single column of fire, and flew out through the open launch aperture, leaving trembling layers of heat behind. The aperture closed up immediately, and automatically activated compressors began flushing clean air into the bay, which was filled with swirling clouds of acrid smoke. I was completely oblivious to all this. My hands gripping the console, my face still smarting with living fire, my hair curled and scorched from the thermic blast, I was gasping for breath. The air was filled with the stench of burning and the smell of ionization, unmistakable as ozone.

Though at the moment of liftoff I'd closed my eyes instinctively, I'd still been struck by the exhaust flame. For a good while I could see nothing but black, red, and gold rings. Gradually they dissipated. The smoke, dust, and fog thinned, drawn into the perpetually moaning ventilation ducts. The first thing I saw was the greenish glow of the radar screen. I started maneuvering the directional reflector, looking for the rocket. When I found it, it was already above the atmosphere. I'd never in my life sent up a projectile in such a mad, blind fashion, with no idea what acceleration to give it or even where to send it. It occurred to me that the simplest thing would be to put it in orbit around Solaris, at an altitude of six hundred miles or so, because then I could turn off the engines—if they were left on too long, I thought it might lead to a disaster that could have unpredictable consequences. I ascertained from the tables that a six-hundred-mile orbit was stationary. It didn't guarantee anything, true, but it was the only solution I could see.

I had switched the loudspeaker off right after takeoff, and I lacked the courage to turn it back on. I would have done virtually anything not to have to hear again that terrible voice, which carried no vestige of anything human. This much I could say—all appearances had been smashed, and from under the appearance of Harey's face another, truer face had begun to show, compared to which the alternative of madness was truly becoming a liberation.

It was one o'clock when I left the docking bay.

I had burns on my face and hands. I remembered that when I'd been looking for sleeping pills for Harey (I'd have laughed now at my naivety, if I only could), in the first-aid kit I'd noticed sunburn lotion, so I went back to my cabin. I opened the door and in the red light of the dawn I saw someone sitting in the armchair that Harey had been kneeling by earlier on. I was paralyzed with fear, I jerked back instinctively, about to flee. It only lasted a split second. The person in the chair looked up. It was Snaut. With his back to me and his legs crossed (he was still wearing the same linen pants with the reagent burns), he was looking through some papers. There was a whole pile of them on a small table. When he saw me he put them all aside and stared at me for a moment despondently over his eyeglasses, which were perched on the tip of his nose.

Without a word I went up to the washbasin, took the semi-liquid lotion from the first aid kit and began applying it to the worst places on my forehead and cheeks. Luckily I wasn't too swollen and my eyes were fine, thanks to the fact that I'd closed them tight. I took a sterile needle, punctured some of the bigger blisters on my temples and cheeks and squeezed out the serous fluid. Then I placed two sheets of moistened gauze on my face. The whole time Snaut observed me closely. I paid him no heed. When I finally finished these operations (my face stung more and more), I sat in the other armchair. I first had to remove Harey's dress from it. It was a perfectly ordinary dress, aside from the matter of the missing fastener.

Snaut, his hands folded on his bony knees, was following my movements critically.

"How about a chat?" he said when I sat down.

I didn't answer. I pressed on the gauze, which had begun to slide down my cheek.

"So we had guests, did we?"

"Yes," I retorted drily. I didn't have the slightest desire to play along with his tone.

"And we got rid of them? I must say you went about it very energetically."

He touched his forehead, which was still peeling. Fresh patches of new skin were beginning to appear. I stared at them, suddenly feeling a fool. Why hadn't I thought about Snaut's and Sartorius's so-called "sunburn" till now? All this time I'd thought it was from the sun—but of course no one goes sunbathing on Solaris. . .

"Though it was a fairly modest beginning, right?" he said,

ignoring the sudden flash of understanding in my eyes. “Various narcotics, poisons, catch-as-catch-can, eh?”

“What’s your point? Now we can talk as equals. If you feel like acting the fool you’d be better off leaving.”

“Sometimes a person can’t help being a fool,” he said. He looked up at me through narrowed eyes.

“You’re not going to try and tell me you never used rope or hammer? You never threw an inkpot like Luther? No? How about that,” he said with a grimace. “You’re quite the stand-up guy. Even the washbasin is undamaged; you didn’t try to break any heads on it, nothing. You didn’t smash the cabin up. Right away you just opened the rocket, slammed it shut and wham-bam thank you ma’am, launched it into space and that was that?!”

He glanced over at the clock.

“In that case we should have two hours, three even,” he finished. He stared at me, stared with a disagreeable smile, till he went on:

“So you reckon I’m a swine?”

“A complete swine,” I agreed forcefully.

“Is that so? Would you have believed me if I’d told you? Would you have believed a single word of it?”

I said nothing.

“Gibarian was the first one it happened to,” he continued, still with his fake smile. “He locked himself in his cabin. He’d only talk through the door. And us, can you guess what we figured?”

I knew, but I preferred to remain silent.

“It’s obvious—we thought he’d gone mad. He told us some of it through the door, but not everything. You can probably even guess why he wouldn’t say who exactly was with him. You know full well: *suum cuique*—to each his own. But he was a true scientist. He demanded that we give him a chance.”

“What chance?”

“I guess he was trying to classify it somehow, figure it out. He worked through the night. You know what he did? I think you do!”

“Those calculations,” I said. “In the drawer. At the radio station. That was him?”

“Yes. But at that point I knew nothing about it all.”

“How long did it go on?”

“The visit? A week maybe. Talking through the door. All sorts of things went on. We thought he was having hallucinations, that he was under some kind of motor stimulus. I gave him Scopolamine.”

“You gave it to *him*?!”

“Well, yes. He accepted it, but not for himself. He was experimenting. That was how things went.”

“What about you two?”

“Us? On the third day we decided to force our way into his cabin, to break down the door if we had to. We had noble intentions of treating him.”

“Oh. . . That explains it!” I exclaimed inadvertently.

“Right.”

“And there. . . in the locker. . .”

“Exactly, dear boy. Exactly. He didn’t know that in the meantime we’d had visitors, too. And we couldn’t attend to him anymore. He didn’t know. Now it’s. . . it’s kind of. . . routine.”

He said it so faintly that I surmised the last word rather than actually hearing it.

“Wait a minute, I don’t follow,” I said. “Surely you must have heard something. You said yourself that you listened in at the door. You must have heard two voices, so. . .”

“No. There was only his voice. And even if there’d been other unidentifiable noises, you understand we’d have assumed it was all him. . .”

“Only him alone? But. . . why?”

“I don’t know. I admit I have a theory. But I’m in no hurry to share it, especially since it doesn’t help any, even if it explains a few things. That’s right. But you must have seen something yesterday already, or you’d have taken both of us for madmen?”

“I thought I’d gone mad myself.”

“Is that right. So you didn’t see anyone?”

“I did.”

“Who?!”

His grimace was no longer a smirk. I gave him a long stare before I answered:

“The. . . black woman. . .”

He didn’t say anything, but the whole of his body, tense and leaning forward, relaxed imperceptibly.

“You might have warned me,” I began, with less conviction now.

“I did.”

“But how!”

“The only possible way. You have to understand, I didn’t know *who* it would be! No one knows that, it can’t be known. . .”

“Listen, Snaut, I have some questions. You’ve known about it. . . for some time. Will she. . . it. . . What’ll happen to her?”

“Are you asking if she’ll come back?”

“Right.”

“Yes and no. . .”

“What does that mean?”

“She’ll come back like at the beginning. . . of the first visit. She won’t know anything, or, to be precise, she’ll act as if everything you did to get rid of her simply never took place. She won’t be aggressive unless you create conditions in which she has to be.”

“What conditions?”

“It depends on the circumstances.”

“Snaut!”

“What’s the problem?”

“We can’t afford the luxury of keeping secrets!”

“It’s not a luxury,” he interrupted drily. “Kelvin, I have the impression you still don’t understand. . . though wait a moment!”

His eyes flashed.

“Can you tell me *who* was here?!”

I swallowed hard, and lowered my head. I didn’t want to look at him. I wished it were someone else, not him. But I had no choice. A strip of gauze came unstuck and fell onto my arm. I shuddered at the wet touch.

“A woman that I. . .”

I trailed off.

“She killed herself. She made a. . .she injected herself. . .”

He waited.

“She committed suicide?” he asked, seeing I wasn’t saying anything.

“Yes.”

“And that’s all?”

I said nothing.

“That can’t be all. . .”

I glanced up sharply. He wasn’t looking at me.

“How do you know?”

He didn’t answer.

“All right,” I said. I licked my lips. “We had a falling out. Well, not exactly. It was me who said something to her, you know, the way you do when you’re angry. I packed my things and left. She’d given me to understand, she didn’t say it outright, but when you’ve lived with someone for years you don’t need to. . . I was convinced it was just talk—that she’d be afraid to do it. And. . . I told her that, too. The

next day I remembered I'd left the... the shots in a drawer. She knew they were there—I'd brought them home from the lab, I'd needed them. At the time I told her what effect they have. I got scared, I was going to go get them, but then I realized it would look like I was taking her seriously, and. . . I let it be. The day after that I went all the same, it was nagging at me. When I got there. . . she was already dead."

"Oh, you poor, innocent boy. . ."

I started in anger. But when I looked at him I could see he wasn't making fun of me. I felt like I was looking at him for the first time. His face was ashen. Unutterable exhaustion lay in the deep folds of his cheeks, he looked like someone gravely ill.

"Why do you say that?" I asked, strangely abashed.

"Because the story's tragic. No no," he added hurriedly, seeing me stir, "You still don't get it. Of course, you can experience that as profoundly as you want, you can even see yourself as a murderer. But. . . it's not the worst thing in all this."

"Is that so!" I said sardonically.

"I'm glad you don't believe me, really. What happened may have been terrible, but the most terrible thing is what. . . didn't happen. Ever."

"I don't follow. . . , " I said faintly. I truly didn't. He nodded.

"A normal person," he said. "What is a normal person? Someone who's never done anything heinous? Right, but has he never even thought about it? Or maybe he never thought about it, but something inside him thought it, the idea popped into his head, ten or thirty years ago, maybe he fought it off and forgot about it, and he wasn't afraid, because he knew he'd never carry it out. Right, but now, imagine that suddenly, in broad daylight, among other people, he meets IT embodied, chained to him, indestructible. What then? What do you have then?"

I said nothing.

"The Station," he said quietly. "Then you have Solaris Station."

"But. . . what could it actually be?" I asked hesitantly. "You're not a criminal, after all, nor Sartorius. . ."

"Come on, Kelvin, you're a psychologist!" he interrupted me impatiently. "Who hasn't had a dream like that? An imagining? Think of. . . of the fetishist who's in love with, I don't know, some dirty underwear, who risks his skin to obtain by hook or by crook a disgusting scrap of cloth that he adores. That has to be amusing, right? He's disgusted by the object of his desire, and yet at the same time crazy about it, prepared to put his life in danger for it—his

passion may equal Romeo's for Juliet. . . Such things happen, it's undeniable. But surely you understand there are also other things. . . situations. . . the kind that no one has dared enact beyond their own thoughts, in a single moment of confusion, breakdown, madness, call it what you will. After which, the word becomes flesh. That's all."

"That's. . . all," I repeated mindlessly, in a hollow voice. My head was in a whirl. "But, but the Station? What does the Station have to do with it?"

"Surely you're kidding," he murmured. He peered at me. "This whole time I'm talking about Solaris, nothing but Solaris. It's not my fault if it's so drastically different from your expectations. Besides, you've already seen enough to at least hear me out.

"We head out into space, ready for anything, which is to say, for solitude, arduous work, self-sacrifice, and death. Out of modesty we don't say it aloud, but from time to time we think about how magnificent we are. In the meantime—in the meantime, we're not trying to conquer the universe; all we want is to expand Earth to its limits. Some planets are said to be as hot and dry as the Sahara, others as icy as the poles or tropical as the Brazilian jungle. We're humanitarian and noble, we've no intention of subjugating other races, we only want to impart our values to them and in return, to appropriate their heritage. We see ourselves as Knights of the Holy Contact. That's another falsity. We're not searching for anything except people. We don't need other worlds. We need mirrors. We don't know what to do with other worlds. One world is enough, even there we feel stifled. We desire to find our own idealized image; they're supposed to be globes, civilizations more perfect than ours; in other worlds we expect to find the image of our own primitive past. Yet on the other side there's something we refuse to accept, that we fend off; though after all, from Earth we didn't bring merely a distillation of virtues, the heroic figure of Humankind! We came here as we truly are, and when the other side shows us that truth—the part of it we pass over in silence—we're unable to come to terms with it!"

"Then what is it?" I asked, having heard him out patiently.

"It's what we wanted: contact with another civilization. We have it, this contact! Our own monstrous ugliness, our own buffoonery and shame, magnified as if it was under a microscope!"

Rage shook in his voice.

"So you think it's. . . the ocean? What for, though? Never mind *how* for a moment. For the love of God, what for?! Do you really think it's trying to play with us? Or punish us? That would be some truly primitive demonology! A planet taken over by a huge devil who satisfies his satanic sense of humor by sending succubi to members of

a scientific expedition! Surely *you* don't believe in such utter nonsense?!"

"This devil is far from stupid," he muttered through his teeth. I looked at him in surprise. It crossed my mind that after all, he could have had a nervous breakdown, even if what had happened on the Station couldn't be explained by madness. Reactive psychosis... ? I wondered further, when he began to laugh very quietly, hardly making any sound.

"You're diagnosing me? Wait a while yet. You've actually only experienced it in such a mild form you still don't know anything!"

"I get it—the devil took pity on me," I retorted. The conversation was beginning to tire me.

"What is it you're really after? You want me to tell you what plans are being hatched against us by x-billion cells of metamorphic plasma? Maybe none at all."

"What do you mean, none?" I asked, taken aback. Snaut was still smiling.

"You know as well as I do that science is only concerned with how something happens, not why it happens. How, then? Well, it began about eight or nine days after the X-ray experiment. Maybe the ocean was responding to the radiation with another kind of radiation, maybe it was using it to probe our brains and get them to release some kind of mental encystments."

"Encystments?"

This was beginning to interest me.

"Right, processes separated from the rest of the mind, enclosed, suppressed, walled in, sore spots of the memory. It was treating them as a recipe, as a plan for reconstruction. . . I mean, you know the close resemblance between asymmetrical crystals of chromosomes and the nucleic compounds of cerebrosides that constitute the substrate of memory processes. . . After all, hereditary plasma is plasma that remembers. So it took it from us, made a note of it, and next, well, you know what came next. But why was it done? Ha! In any case, it wasn't to destroy us. That would have been a lot easier to accomplish. With its technological abilities it could do anything at all, for example confront us with our own doppelgangers."

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "So that's why you were so scared the first evening when I arrived!"

"Yes. Though," he added, "it may in fact have done so. How do you know I'm the same good old Rat who came here two years ago. . .?"

He started laughing softly, as if my bewilderment gave him God

knows what kind of satisfaction; but he soon stopped.

"No, no," he murmured, "There's enough going on without that. . . There may be other differences, but I only know one—you and I can be killed."

"And *they* can't?"

"I'd advise you not to try. It's a terrible thing to behold!"

"Not with anything?"

"I don't know. In any case not with poison, knife, rope. . ."

"Atomic blaster?"

"Would you be prepared to try?"

"I'm not sure. If you know they're not human."

"The thing is, they are, in a certain sense. Subjectively they're human. They have no awareness of their. . . origins. You must have noticed?"

"Right. So then. . . how is it?"

"They regenerate amazingly quickly. Impossibly quickly, before your eyes, I'm telling you. Then they start all over again, behaving like. . . like. . ."

"Like what?"

"Like our imaginations of them, the mental record that was used to. . ."

"That's right. It's true," I agreed. I was ignoring the fact that lotion was dripping from my cheeks onto my arms.

"Did Gibarian know. . . ?" I asked abruptly. He gave me an intent look.

"Did he know what we know?"

"Yes."

"Almost certainly."

"How do you know, did he tell you?"

"No. But I found a book in his cabin. . ."

"The *Minor Apocrypha*?" I exclaimed, jumping up.

"Right. How could you know about it?" he asked, suddenly worried, his eyes boring into me. I shook my head.

"Take it easy," I said. "Come on, you can see I'm burned and not regenerating at all, right? In his cabin there was a letter to me."

"Is that so? A letter? What did it say?"

"Not a lot. It was actually more of a note than a letter. It was bibliographic references to the Appendix of the *Yearbook of Solaristics*, and to this *Minor Apocrypha*. What is it?"

"It's an old thing. It might have something to do with all this.

Here.”

From his pocket he took a slim little leather-bound volume with tattered corners and handed it to me.

“And Sartorius?” I asked as I put the book away.

“What about Sartorius? In a situation like this everyone acts whatever way. . . they can. He’s trying to be normal—with him that means being official.”

“Come off it!”

“Seriously. One time I was in a situation with him, never mind the details, suffice it to say we only had eleven hundred pounds of oxygen left for eight people. One after another we gave up our daily tasks, by the end everyone was walking around with a beard; he was the only one who shaved, polished his shoes—that’s the kind of guy he is. Of course, whatever he does now is going to be playacting, comedy or crime.”

“Crime?”

“Well, maybe not crime. We need a new term for it. Like ‘jet-propelled divorce.’ Does that sound better?”

“You’re quite the wit,” I said.

“Would you rather I was crying? You suggest something.”

“Give me a break.”

“No, I mean it: now you know more or less as much as me. Do you have a plan?”

“I like that! I don’t even know what I’m going to do when. . . she appears again. She has to appear again, right?”

“Probably.”

“How do they actually get in? I mean, the Station is hermetically sealed. Maybe through the plating. . .”

He shook his head.

“The plating is in good shape. I’ve no idea how they do it. The ‘guests’ are usually there when you wake up, and everyone has to sleep from time to time, after all.”

“What about locking them up?”

“It helps for a short time. Then there are other methods—you know what I’m talking about.”

He stood up. I followed suit.

“Listen, Snaut. . . You think the Station should be closed down, but you want the idea to come from me?”

He shook his head.

“It’s not that simple. Naturally we could escape, if only to the Satelloid, and send an SOS from there. Obviously they’d treat us like

lunatics—there'd be a sanatorium on Earth, until we'd obligingly retract the whole thing. After all, there have been cases of group madness at isolated outposts like this. . . It wouldn't be so bad. A nice garden, peace and quiet, white rooms, walks with the orderlies. . ."

He was completely serious, his hands in his pockets, staring vacantly into the corner of the room. The red sun had already dropped below the horizon and the curling waves had melted into an inky wasteland. The sky was afire. Clouds with lilac-tinted edges drifted over the unutterably dismal two-toned landscape.

"So do you want to run away? Or not? Not just yet?"

He smiled.

"You undaunted conqueror. . . You haven't had a real taste of it yet, or you wouldn't keep insisting like that. It's not a matter of what I want but of what's possible."

"What is?"

"That's what I don't know."

"So we stay here? You reckon a means'll be found. . ."

He looked at me, scrawny, the skin on his wrinkled face peeling.

"Who knows? Maybe it'll be worth it," he said finally. "We're unlikely to learn anything about it, but maybe about ourselves. . ."

He turned, picked up his papers and left. I wanted to stop him, but my open mouth made no sound. There was nothing to be done; I could only wait. I went up to the window and looked out at the blood-black ocean without really seeing it. It occurred to me that I could lock myself in one of the rockets at the docking bay, but I didn't take the idea seriously, it was too silly—sooner or later I'd have to come out. I sat down by the window and took out the book Snaut had given me. There was still enough light; it turned the pages pink, while the whole room glowed red. The book contained a number of articles and studies, mostly of very dubious value, collected by one Otto Ravintzer, M. Phil. Every science comes with its own pseudo-science, a bizarre distortion that comes from a certain kind of mind: astronomy has its caricaturist in astrology, chemistry used to have alchemy. So little wonder that the emergence of solaristics was accompanied by a veritable explosion of the oddest notions. Ravintzer's book was filled with this sort of mental matter—prefaced, to be fair, by an introduction in which the editor distanced himself from this house of wonders. He simply believed, not without reason, that such a collection might constitute a record of the times that would be of value both to historians and to psychologists of science.

Berton's report occupied a prominent place in the book. It consisted of several parts. The first was a transcription of his extremely laconic logbook.

From fourteen hundred to sixteen forty ship's time, the notes were terse and negative.

Altitude 3000 feet, or 4000, or 2500. Nothing observed, ocean deserted. This was repeated several times.

Then at 16.40: *Red mist rising. Visibility 700 yards. Ocean deserted.*

17.00: *Fog thickening, silence, visibility 400 yards with clearer moments. Descending to 700 feet.*

17.20: *In fog. Altitude 700. Visibility 20-40 yards. Silence. Climbing to 1300.*

17.45: *Altitude 1600. Banks of fog to the horizon. In the fog, funnel-shaped openings through which ocean can be seen. Something happening inside them. Attempting to enter one such funnel.*

17.52: *Kind of whirlpool visible, throwing up yellow foam. Am surrounded by wall of fog. Altitude 300. Descending to 60.*

This was the end of the transcription from Berton's logbook. The next part of the so-called report was an excerpt from his medical history; to be precise, it was the text of a statement dictated by Berton and interspersed with questions from members of the commission.

Berton: When I dropped to a hundred feet, maintaining altitude became difficult, because in the circular space free of fog there were gusty winds. I had to keep a firm hold on the rudder, and for this reason, for some time—perhaps 10 or 15 minutes—I didn't look out of the cockpit. As a result, I unintentionally entered into the fog, blown there by a strong gust. It wasn't ordinary fog but a kind of suspension, colloidal in nature it seemed, because it clouded all my windows. I had a lot of trouble cleaning them. The suspension was extremely sticky. At the same time, my rotor speed had been reduced by thirty-some percent because of resistance from the fog or whatever it was, and I began to lose altitude. I was very low and I was worried I'd flip over on the waves, so I gave it full power. The craft maintained altitude, but didn't rise any higher. I still had four cartridges of rocket boosters. I chose not to use them, thinking the situation could get worse and then I'd need them. At maximum revs the craft began to vibrate badly; I figured the rotors must have gotten covered in the strange suspension. But the load indicators were still showing zero, so there was nothing I could do. I hadn't seen the sun from the moment I entered the cloud, though the fog was a phosphorescent red in that direction. I was still circling in the hope that I'd eventually come upon one of those holes in the fog, and in fact I did about half an hour later. I climbed into a free zone that was almost perfectly circular, with a diameter of several hundred yards. It was bounded by fog that was

swirling dramatically, as if it were being lifted by powerful convection currents. For this reason I attempted to remain as best I could in the center of the hole—that was where the air was calmest. At that time I noticed a change in the surface of the ocean. The waves had almost completely disappeared, and the top of the fluid—the stuff the ocean is made of—had become semi-transparent, with smoky spots that faded away until, after a very short time, the whole thing was completely clear and I could see several yards, I believe, into the depths. Deep down there was a kind of gold-colored ooze that was gathering and sending thin streaks upwards. When it emerged onto the surface it became glassy and shining, it started seething and foaming, and solidifying. At this point it looked like dense burned caramel. This ooze or sludge collected into thick knots, rose up out of the ocean, it formed cauliflower-like swellings and slowly made various shapes. I started being pulled towards the wall of fog, so for a few minutes I had to counter the drift with the engine and the rudder. When I was able to look out again, down below, underneath me, I saw something that resembled a garden. That's right, a garden. I saw dwarf trees and hedges, paths, none of it real—it was all made of the same substance, which by now had completely hardened, like yellowish plaster. That was how it appeared. The surface glistened brightly. I descended as low as I could to get a closer look.

Question: Did the trees and other plants you saw have leaves?

Berton: No. It was just a general shape—like a model of a garden. Yes, that's it—a model. That was what it looked like. A model, but a life-sized one, I guess. After a while it all began to crack and break apart. Through gaps that were completely black, a dense sludge rose to the surface in waves and congealed, part trickled down, part remained, and the whole thing began swirling and getting covered in foam, so that now I couldn't see anything else but it. At the same time the fog began to draw in around me on every side, so I cranked it up and ascended to 1000 feet.

Q: Are you completely certain that what you saw resembled a garden and nothing else?

Berton: Yes. Because I noticed various details: I remember, for example, that in one place there was a row of what looked like square boxes. It occurred to me later they could have been beehives.

Q: It occurred to you later? But not at the moment you saw it?

Berton: No, because it all looked like it was made of plaster. I saw other things as well.

Q: What things?

Berton: I can't say, because I didn't get a close look at them. I had the impression that under several of the bushes there were some kinds of

tools. They were elongated shapes with protruding teeth, like plaster casts of small gardening implements. But this I'm not entirely sure about. The other thing I am.

Q: Did it not occur to you that this might be a hallucination?

Berton: No. I thought it was a mirage. I didn't think about hallucinations, because I was feeling absolutely fine, and also because I'd never seen anything like it in my life before. When I climbed to 1000 feet the fog underneath me was pocked with cavities; it looked like Swiss cheese. One of the holes was empty and I could see the waves; in others there was agitation. I descended into one of these places and at a distance of about a hundred twenty feet I saw that under the ocean's surface—though only just—there was a wall, like the wall of a very large building. It was clearly visible through the waves, and it had rows of regular rectangular openings in it, like windows. I even had the impression that in some of the windows something was moving. That, I'm no longer completely sure about. The wall began to rise slowly and emerge from the ocean. Whole waterfalls of ooze were dripping from it and there were some kind of things made of ooze, sort of grainy condensations. All of a sudden the wall broke in two and sank so quickly it disappeared at once. I brought the craft back up higher and flew right over the fog, so close I was almost touching it with my undercarriage. I saw another empty funnel-shaped place—it was several times bigger than the first one, I believe.

Even from far off I could see something floating. Since it was light-colored, almost white, I thought it was Fechner's space suit, especially because its shape looked human. I made an abrupt about-turn; I was afraid I'd pass the place and not be able to find it again. The figure rose upwards slightly at this moment; it looked as if it was swimming, or standing up to its waist in the ocean. I made a hurried descent, and came so close I felt the undercarriage hit something soft, the crest of a wave, I guessed, since they were high in that place. The person—yes, it was a person—was not wearing a space suit. Despite this he was moving.

Q: Did you see his face?

Berton: Yes.

Q: Who was it?

Berton: It was a child.

Q: What child? Had you ever seen it before in your life?

Berton: No. Never. In any case, not that I can recall. Besides, as soon as I drew closer—I was forty-odd yards away, maybe a little more—I realized there was something wrong with it.

Q: What do you mean?

Berton: Let me explain. At first I couldn't put my finger on it. It was only a moment later that I realized: it was extraordinarily big. Gigantic would be more like it. It was maybe thirteen feet in length. I remember distinctly that when the undercarriage hit the wave, its face was a little higher than mine, and though I was sitting in the cockpit, I must have been a good ten feet above the surface of the ocean.

Q: If it was so big, how do you know it was a child?

Berton: Because it was a very small child.

Q: Does that answer not strike you as illogical?

Berton: No. Not at all. Because I saw its face. Besides, its body was proportioned like that of a child. It looked to me like. . . almost like a baby. No, that's going too far. It was perhaps two or three years old. It had black hair and blue eyes. They were huge! And it was naked. Completely naked, like a new-born infant. It was wet, or rather slimy; its skin sort of shimmered.

This sight had a terrible effect on me. I no longer believed it could be a mirage. I'd seen it too close up. It was rising and falling with the waves, but it was also moving independently of them. It was disgusting!

Q: Why? What was it doing?

Berton: It looked, well, like something in a museum, like a doll, but a living doll. It was opening and closing its mouth and making different movements. Disgusting. Because they weren't its own movements.

Q: Can you say what you mean by that?

Berton: I didn't get closer than fifteen or so yards, maybe twenty would be more accurate. But I already mentioned how huge it was, and because of this I could see it extremely distinctly. Its eyes were shining and in general it gave the impression of a living child; it was just those movements, as if someone were attempting. . . as if someone were trying them out.

Q: Can you explain that further?

Berton: I'm not sure I can. That was the impression I had. It was intuitive. I didn't think about it. The movements were unnatural.

Q: Are you trying to say that the arms, for example, were moving in a way that isn't possible for human arms because of the limitations of mobility in the joints?

Berton: No. That's not it at all. It was just. . . the movements made no sense. Normally any movement has some meaning, it serves some purpose. . .

Q: You think so? The movements of an infant don't have to mean anything.

Berton: I'm aware of that. But an infant's movements are chaotic,

uncoordinated. They're not specific. Whereas these movements, they were. . . Oh, I know! They were methodical. They took place in sequence, in groups and series. As if someone were trying to find out what the child was capable of doing with its arms, what it could do with its torso and its mouth. The worst was the face, I guess because the face is the most expressive part of the body. That face was like a face. . . No, I don't know how to describe it. It was alive, yes, yet it wasn't human. I mean, the features very much were, the eyes, the complexion, everything. But the look, the expressions, not at all.

Q: Were these grimaces? Do you know what a person's face looks like during an epileptic seizure?

Berton: Yes, I've seen such a seizure. I understand. No, it was something else. In epilepsy there are contractions and twitches, while these movements were entirely smooth and continuous, graceful, you might say melodious. I can't think of another word. And the face, with the face it was the same. A face can't look as if one half of it is happy and the other half sad, as if one part is threatening or afraid and the other half exultant, or something like that. But with this child that's how it was. Plus, all these movements and facial expressions took place at an amazing speed. I was only there for a short time. Ten seconds perhaps. I don't know if it was even that long.

Q: And you're suggesting that you managed to see all that in such a short time? Besides, how do you know how long it lasted, did you check your watch?

Berton: No. I didn't check my watch, but I've been flying for sixteen years. In my line of work you have to be able estimate time to the second, I mean short stretches of time; it becomes a matter of instinct. You need it for landings. A pilot isn't worth his salt if he can't tell whether a particular phenomenon lasts five seconds or ten, regardless of what's going on around him. It's the same with observation. You learn it over the years, to take in as much as possible in the shortest time.

Q: Is that all you saw?

Berton: No. But the rest I don't remember in as much detail. I suppose it was too powerful a dose for me. It felt like my brain was bunged up. The fog was beginning to drop and I must have increased altitude. I must have, but I don't remember how or when I did so. It was the first time in my life I came close to flipping over. My hands were shaking so badly I couldn't hold onto the rudder properly. I believe I was shouting and calling the Base, though I knew the radio was down.

Q: At that time did you attempt to return?

Berton: No, because when I finally reached my ceiling it occurred to me that Fechner might be in one of those holes. I know it sounds

ridiculous. All the same, that's what I thought. Since these kinds of things are happening, I thought to myself, maybe I'll manage to find Fechner as well. So I decided to enter as many of the holes in the fog as I could. But the third time, when I climbed back up again I realized that after what I'd seen I was in no state to continue. I couldn't do it. I have to say this, and besides, it's no secret. I suddenly felt sick, and I vomited in the cockpit. I'd never experienced this before. I'd never felt queasy.

Q: It was a symptom of poisoning, Berton.

Berton: Maybe. I don't know. But what I saw the third time, I didn't make that up, that wasn't caused by poisoning.

Q: How do you know?

Berton: It wasn't a hallucination. A hallucination is something created by my own brain, right?

Q: That's correct.

Berton: Exactly. But this my brain could not have created. I'll never believe that. It wouldn't have been capable.

Q: How about you rather tell us what it was?

Berton: First I need to know how what I've said so far is going to be treated.

Q: What does that have to do with it?

Berton: For me it's fundamental. I've said that I saw something I'll never ever forget. If the commission determines that what I said is even one percent plausible, such that certain research on the ocean needs to be begun, then I'll tell everything. But if the commission is going to see it all as figments of my imagination, I won't say another word.

Q: Why not?

Berton: Because the content of my hallucinations, however ghastly they might be, is my private matter. Whereas the content of my experiences on Solaris is not.

Q: Does that mean you refuse to answer any more questions until a decision is reached by the appropriate organs of the expedition? You do understand that this committee is not authorized to make any immediate decisions?

Berton: That's right.

The first transcript ended at this point. There was also an excerpt from a second, recorded eleven days later.

Chairman: . . . and taking all this into consideration, the commission,

comprising three medical doctors, three biologists, one physicist, one mechanical engineer and the second in command of the expedition, has concluded that the incidents described by Berton constitute a hallucinatory syndrome resulting from poisoning by the atmosphere of the planet, a condition in which symptoms of confusion were accompanied by a stimulation of the associative regions of the cerebral cortex; and that these incidents had little or no correspondence in reality.

Berton: Excuse me, what does “little or no” mean? What is “little”? How big is it?

Chairman: Allow me to finish. A separate minority report was filed by Dr. Archibald Messenger, physicist, who testified that what Berton described could in his opinion have happened in reality and deserved careful investigation. That is all.

Berton: I repeat my previous question.

Chairman: The matter is simple. “Little” means that certain real phenomena could have triggered your hallucinations, Berton. On a windy night the most normal person in the world can mistake a swaying bush for a human figure. All the more so on an alien planet, when the observer’s mind is affected by poison. This is no affront to you, Berton. In light of the preceding, what is your decision?

Berton: First, I’d like to know the consequences of Dr. Messenger’s minority report.

Chairman: Practically speaking, there are none. That is to say, no investigation will be undertaken in that regard.

Berton: Is what we are saying going to be transcribed?

Chairman: Yes.

Berton: In that case I wish to say that in my view the commission’s decision is an affront not to me—I’m not important here—but to the spirit of this expedition. As I stated the first time, I will not respond to further questions.

Chairman: Is that all?

Berton: Yes. But I would like to talk with Dr. Messenger. Is that possible?

Chairman: Of course.

That was the end of the second transcript. At the bottom of page there was a note in small print reporting that the following day Dr. Messenger met with Berton and spoke with him privately for almost three hours, after which he wrote to the Expeditionary Board, calling once again for an inquiry into the pilot’s testimony. He stated that this was necessitated by additional new data given to him by Berton,

which he could reveal only if the Board agreed to the inquiry. The Board, comprising Shannahan, Timolis and Trahier, turned down the request, and the matter was closed.

The book also contained a photocopy of one page of a letter found in Messenger's papers after he died. It was probably a rough draft; Ravintzer had been unable to determine whether the letter itself had been sent, or what its consequences had been. The text began:

. . . their colossal obtuseness. Out of concern for its authority the Board, and specifically Shannahan and Timolis (Trahier's voice didn't count), rejected my demands. Now I'm appealing directly to the Institute, but you yourself know such a protest is ineffectual. I'm bound by my word, so unfortunately I can't tell you what Berton told me. The Board's decision was of course influenced by the fact that the revelations had come from a person with no academic standing, though a good many researchers would have envied that pilot his presence of mind and gift for observation. Please, send me the following by return mail:

- 1. Fechner's bio information, including his childhood.*
- 2. Anything you know about his family and family matters; I gather he left behind a small child.*
- 3. The topography of the region in which he grew up.*

I'd also like to give you my own take on all this. As you know, a short time after Fechner and Carucci set out, in the center of the red sun a spot appeared whose corpuscular radiation shut down radio communication, especially, according to data from the Satelloid, in the southern hemisphere; in other words where our Base was. Of all the search parties, Fechner and Carucci went furthest from the Base.

The whole time we'd been on the planet, up until the day of the accident we had never seen such dense, stubbornly lingering fog, accompanied by complete silence.

I think that what Berton saw was part of an "Operation Human" being carried out by the viscous monster. The actual source of all the formations seen by Berton was Fechner—was his brain, in the course of some "mental autopsy" unimaginable to us. This was an experimental re-creation, a reconstruction of certain traces in his memory—probably those that were most enduring.

I know this sounds fantastical; I know I could be wrong. So I'm asking you for help. I'm presently on Alaric, where I'll be waiting for your response.

Yours,

A.

It had gotten so dark I was barely able to read; the book turned gray in my hands, the print began to melt away before my eyes, but the blank space below the text showed I had come to the end of the story, which in light of my own experiences I regarded as highly plausible. I turned toward the window. Outside there was a deep purple, a few clouds smoldering above the horizon like dying embers. The ocean was invisible, swathed in darkness. I heard the subdued flutter of the paper strips over the vents. The heated air, with its faint taste of ozone, had grown lifeless. An absolute silence filled the entire Station. I thought to myself that in our decision to remain, there was nothing heroic. The time of valiant planetary struggles, fearless expeditions, terrible deaths, like that of Fechner, the ocean's first victim—this era had come to an end long ago. I no longer really cared who had “visited” Snaut or Sartorius. After a time, I thought, we'll stop feeling embarrassed and hiding ourselves away. If we won't be able to get rid of our “guests,” we'll grow used to them and we'll live with them, and if their Creator changes the rules of the game we'll adapt to the new ones, even if for a while we'll kick against the pricks, raise a storm. One or another of us might even commit suicide, but in the end the new state of affairs will also reach equilibrium. The room was filling with a darkness ever more like that on Earth. The only lighter places now were the white shapes of the washbasin and the mirror. I stood up, felt for the wad of cotton wool on the shelf, moistened a ball of it and wiped my face. Then I lay down on my back on the bunk. Somewhere overhead the vent thrummed and fell silent in turn, sounding like a fluttering moth. I couldn't even make out the window; everything was taken over by blackness. A glimmering streak from who knew where was hovering before me; I couldn't tell whether it was on the wall or far away in the barrenness beyond the window. I recalled how horrified I'd been at the empty gaze of the Solarian space the previous evening, and I almost smiled. I wasn't afraid of it. I wasn't afraid of anything. I brought my wrist close to my eyes. The face of my watch lit up with its phosphorescent ring of figures. In an hour the blue sun would rise. I reveled in the pervasive darkness. I was breathing deeply, liberated from all thoughts.

At a certain moment, when I moved I felt the flat shape of the tape recorder against my hip. That's right. Gibarian. His voice recorded on tape. It didn't even occur to me to bring him back to life, to hear what he had to say. That was all I could have done for him. I took out the recorder to stow it under the bunk. I heard a rustle and the faint creak of the door opening.

“Kris?” came a soft voice, almost a whisper. “Are you there, Kris? It's so dark.”

“Don't mind that,” I said. “Don't be afraid. Come here.”

I was lying on my back, without a thought, her head on my shoulder. The darkness filling the room was becoming populated. I could hear steps. The walls were disappearing. Something was towering over me, bigger and bigger, endless. I was penetrated through and through, embraced without being touched; I froze still in the darkness, feeling its acute transparency that was displacing the air. I could hear a heart very far away. I focused my whole attention, all the strength I had left, on expecting death throes. They didn't come. I just kept shrinking, while the unseen sky, the unseen horizons, the emptiness, devoid of shapes, clouds, stars, drawing back and swelling, was making me its center; I strove to crawl into the thing I was lying on, but beneath me there was no longer anything and the darkness no longer concealed anything. I clenched my fists and hid my face in them. I no longer had one. My fingers passed all the way through. I felt like shouting, howling. . .

The room was blue-gray. The furniture, walls, corners seemed sketched in broad dull strokes, in outline only, with no color of their own. There was the brightest pearly white in the silence outside the window. My body was drenched in sweat. I glanced to the side; she was looking at me.

"Is your shoulder numb?"

"What?"

She raised her head. Her eyes were the same hue as the room—gray, luminous between her dark lashes. I felt the warmth of her whisper before I understood the words.

"No. Actually, yes."

I placed my hand on her back. The touch teemed. I slowly pulled her to me with my other arm.

"You were having a bad dream," she said.

"A dream? Oh, that's right. Were you not asleep?"

"I don't know. Maybe not. I'm not tired. But you should sleep. Why are you looking at me like that?"

I half-closed my eyes. I could feel the small regular thump of her heart where mine beat slower. A prop, I thought to myself. But I wasn't surprised by anything, even my own indifference. I was beyond fear and despair. I was further on; no one had ever gone that far. I touched her neck with my lips, then went lower down, to the little hollow between the tendons, that was smooth as the inside of a seashell. The pulse was there too.

I lifted myself on an elbow. There were no dawns, no softness of

light. The horizon was filled with an electric blue glow. The first ray crossed the room like a shot. There was a sudden play of rainbow-colored reflections refracted in the mirror, in the door handles, the nickel-plated pipes; the light appeared to be striking against every surface it encountered as if it were trying to break free, to burst the confined space open. By now it was impossible to look. I turned around. Harey's pupils dilated. Her gray irises rose to my face.

"Is it time for day already?" she asked in a lusterless voice. She seemed half-asleep, half-awake.

"It's always like that here, honey."

"And us?"

"What about us?"

"Are we going to be here for a long time?"

I felt like laughing. But when an indistinct sound burst from my chest, it didn't resemble a laugh.

"For quite a while, I think. Do you not want that?"

Her eyelids weren't twitching. She was looking at me intently. Was she winking? I couldn't be sure. She pulled the blanket up; on her arm I saw a small triangular pink mark.

"Why are you staring like that?"

"Because you're beautiful."

She smiled. But it was only out of politeness, a thank-you for the compliment.

"Really? Because you're looking at me as if you. . . as if I. . ."

"What?"

"As if you were searching for something."

"Come off it!"

"No, it's like you thought there was something wrong with me, or there was something I wasn't telling you."

"Not at all."

"If you insist, then I'm sure that's so. But as you wish."

Outside the flaming windows a lifeless blue heat was coming into being. Shading my eyes with my hand, I looked around for my dark glasses. They were on the table. I knelt on the bed, put them on, and caught sight of her reflection in the window. She was waiting for something. When I lay back down beside her she smiled.

"What about for me?"

I suddenly understood.

"Sunglasses?"

I got up and started rummaging through the drawers of the table by the window. I found two pairs, both too big. I handed them to her.

She tried each pair. They slipped half-way down her nose.

The window shades began to descend with their prolonged grinding sound. A moment later and it was night inside the Station, which had crawled into its shell like a turtle. Going by touch alone, I took her glasses off and put them with mine under the bunk.

“What are we going to do?” she asked.

“What people do at night—sleep.”

“Kris.”

“What?”

“Maybe I should make you a new dressing.”

“No, there’s no need. There’s no need. . . darling.”

As I said it, I didn’t know myself if I was pretending, but a moment later, without seeing I put my arms around her slender back and when I felt it tremble, I suddenly believed in her. Though I’m not sure. All at once I felt I was the one deceiving her, not the other way around, because she was only herself.

After that I drifted off to sleep several times and kept being woken from my doze by a cramp. My hammering heart gradually calmed down, I held her close, dead tired; she touched my face and forehead gingerly, checking to see if I didn’t have a fever. This was Harey. Another, truer one could not have existed.

After that thought something changed inside me. I stopped struggling. I fell asleep almost immediately.

I was woken by a gentle touch. There was a pleasant coolness on my forehead. My face was covered with something moist and soft that was slowly being lifted up. I saw Harey’s face leaning over me. With both hands she was squeezing out the excess fluid from the gauze into a porcelain bowl. Nearby stood a bottle of sunburn cream. She smiled at me.

“Boy, did you sleep,” she said, then as she laid the gauze back: “Does that hurt?”

“No.”

I moved the skin on my forehead. It was true, I couldn’t feel the burns now. Harey was sitting on the edge of the bunk, wrapped in an orange-and-white striped man’s bathrobe; her black hair lay spread over the collar. She’d rolled the sleeves all the way up to the elbows so they wouldn’t get in the way. I was feeling extraordinarily hungry—it must have been twenty hours since I’d last eaten. When Harey finished dressing my face I got up. I suddenly caught sight of the two completely identical white dresses with red buttons, which lay side by side. The first was the one I’d helped her take off by cutting the back; the second was the dress she’d come in the day before. This time she’d

unpicked the seam herself with a small pair of scissors, saying the zipper must have gotten stuck.

The two identical dresses were the most terrible thing of all I'd experienced till now. Harey was busy tidying the medicine cabinet. I turned away from her surreptitiously and bit my fist till it bled. Still staring at the two dresses—or rather the same dress repeated two times—I began backing towards the door. Water was still noisily running from the faucet. I opened the door, slipped quietly out and closed it carefully. I could hear the faint murmur of the running water and the clatter of bottles. Then, suddenly, the sound stopped. The strip lighting from the ceiling illuminated the corridor; a hazy patch of reflected light lay on the door, by which I was waiting with clenched jaw. I held the handle, though I didn't expect to be able to keep the door closed. A sudden tug almost wrenched it out of my hand, but the door didn't open; it just shook and started creaking horribly. Stunned, I let go of the handle and took a step back. Something quite incredible was happening with the door—its smooth plastic surface was cratering inwards as if it was being pressed into the room from my side. The enamel began cracking off in small flakes, exposing the steel frame, which was straining ever more. I suddenly realized that instead of pushing the door, which opened towards the corridor, she was trying to open it by pulling it towards herself. The reflection of the light curved on the white surface like a concave mirror; there was a powerful crunching sound and the solid panel, bent to its limit, made a snapping noise. At the same time the handle was ripped from its mount and flew into the room. In the hole it left, there immediately appeared a pair of bloodied hands that kept on pulling, leaving red streaks on the enamel. The panel of the door broke in two, hung crookedly on its hinges, and an orange-and-white creature with a livid blue, lifeless face threw its arms around me sobbing.

If I hadn't been paralyzed by what I'd seen I probably would have attempted to run. Harey was gasping for breath, knocking her head against my shoulder, her hair flying every which way. When I held her I could feel her slipping through my arms. I carried her back into the room, squeezing past the shattered door, and laid her on the bunk. Her fingernails were broken and covered with blood. When she turned her hand I saw the palm was chafed to raw flesh. I looked into her face; her wide-open eyes stared through me expressionless.

"Harey!"

She responded with an inarticulate grunt.

I moved my finger close to her eye. The lid closed. I went to the medicine cabinet. The bunk creaked. I turned around. She was sitting up straight, gazing at her bloodied hands in alarm.

“Kris,” she moaned, “I . . . I . . . What happened to me?”

“You hurt yourself breaking down the door,” I said impassively. There was a feeling in my lips, especially the lower one, as if ants were crawling all over it. I clamped it between my teeth.

Harey looked for a moment at the jagged pieces of plastic hanging loose from the frame and turned her eyes to me. Her chin trembled. I could see her struggling to master her alarm.

I cut a strip of gauze, took some powder for abrasions from the cabinet, and went back to the bunk. But all at once everything I was carrying slipped out of my hands; the glass jar with its gelatin seal broke, but I didn’t even pick it up. It was no longer needed.

I picked up her hand. There was still a faint outline of blood around the fingernails, but the bruising had disappeared, and the palm was covered with fresh pink skin that was lighter than its surroundings, though the wound was fading almost as I watched.

I sat down, stroked her cheek and tried to smile at her, though I can’t say I succeeded.

“Why did you do it, Harey?”

“No. That was. . . me?”

She indicated the door with her eyes.

“Yes. Don’t you remember?”

“No. I mean, I saw you were gone, I got really scared, and. . .”

“And what?”

“I started looking for you. I thought maybe you were in the bathroom. . .”

It was only now I noticed that the locker had been slid aside to reveal the entrance to the bathroom.

“And then?”

“I ran to the door.”

“And?”

“I don’t remember. Something must have happened.”

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

“What *do* you remember? What happened next?”

“I was sitting here on the bed.”

“You don’t remember me carrying you here?”

She hesitated. The corners of her mouth drooped, her face was intent.

“I guess. Maybe. I really can’t say.”

She lowered her feet to the floor and stood up. She went up to the

broken door.

“Kris!”

I put my arms around her shoulders from behind. She was shaking. All at once she turned and sought my eyes.

“Kris,” she whispered, “Kris.”

“Take it easy.”

“Kris, what if. . . Kris, do I have epilepsy?”

Epilepsy? Dear God! I felt like laughing.

“Of course not, darling. It’s just a door, you know, they have these kind of doors here. . .”

We left the room when the outer plating rose over the windows with its drawn-out grinding sound, revealing the disk of the sun setting into the ocean.

I headed for the small galley at the far end of the corridor. Harey and I worked together, checking out the cabinets and refrigerators. I quickly realized she wasn’t much of a cook and couldn’t do a lot more than open a few cans, much like me. I wolfed down the contents of two of the cans and drank endless cups of coffee. Harey ate too, but the way children sometimes eat, so as not to hurt the feelings of the grown-ups—not exactly forcing themselves, but mechanically and indifferently.

The two of us went together to the small surgery next to the radio station. I had a plan. I told her I wanted to examine her just in case. I sat her down in a folding chair and took a hypodermic syringe and needle from the sterilizer. I knew where everything was almost by heart, we’d been so well prepared at the training copy of the Station on Earth. I took a drop of blood from her finger, prepared a smear, dried it in the exhaustor and sprinkled it with silver ions in a high vacuum.

The matter-of-factness of this work had a calming effect. Harey, resting on the cushions of the folding chair, was looking around the interior of the room, cluttered with apparatus.

The silence was broken by the ringing of the internal telephone. I picked up the receiver.

“Kelvin,” I said. I didn’t take my eyes off Harey, who for some time now had been apathetic, as if she’d been exhausted by her experiences in the last few hours.

“You’re in the surgery? Finally!” I heard what sounded like a sigh of relief.

It was Snaut. I waited with the receiver pressed to my ear.

“You have a ‘guest,’ eh?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re busy?”

“Yes.”

“A little examination perhaps?”

“What of it? Are you looking for a chess partner?”

“Give it a rest, Kelvin. Sartorius wants to see you. That is, see us.”

“That’s something new,” I said, surprised. “What about the. . .” I broke off and added:

“Is he alone?”

“No. I misspoke. He wants to talk with us. The three of us can connect by visuphone, he’s going to cover up the screen.”

“Is that so? Why didn’t he just call me directly? Is he embarrassed?”

“Something like that,” Snaut muttered indistinctly. “Well then?”

“You want to set a time? Let’s say in an hour. OK?”

“OK.”

I could see him on the screen, just his face, no bigger than the palm of my hand. For a moment that was filled with the faint hum of current, he looked searchingly into my face.

In the end he said with a certain hesitation:

“How’s life?”

“Bearable. You?”

“I’m guessing a bit worse than for you. Could I. . .”

“You want to come see me?” I guessed. I glanced over my shoulder at Harey. Her head hung over the cushion; she was lying with her legs crossed, in her boredom absentmindedly tossing up the silver ball at the end of a chain attached to the arm of the chair.

“Leave that alone, you hear? Leave it!” I heard Snaut’s raised voice. On the screen I could see him in profile. I didn’t catch the rest, he covered the microphone with his hand, but I saw his lips move.

“No, I can’t come. Maybe later. In an hour, then,” he said quickly, and the screen went blank. I hung up the receiver.

“Who was that?” Harey asked indifferently.

“Just this guy. Snaut. A cybernetician. You don’t know him.”

“Is it going to take much longer?”

“Are you bored?” I asked. I placed the first of a series of slides in the holder of the neutrino microscope and one by one flipped the colored switches. The force fields set up a hollow drone. “There’s not much in the way of entertainment around here. If my modest company isn’t enough for you, things are going to get tough,” I said, distractedly elongating the pauses between words as I simultaneously used both hands to pull the huge black head of the microscope toward

me, and pressed my eyes into the soft rubber cup of the gleaming eyepiece. Harey said something I didn't catch. I saw from above, sharply foreshortened, a vast wilderness flooded by a silvery glow. On it, in a hazy mist there lay flat round rocks that looked shattered and weather-beaten. These were the red corpuscles. I focused the image without removing my eyes; it was as if I were sailing ever deeper into the silvery radiance of the field of vision. At the same time, with my left hand I operated the crank that turned the stage, and when a blood corpuscle solitary as an erratic boulder appeared between the cross-hairs, I increased the magnification. The lens zoomed in on what seemed like a misshapen erythrocyte, sagging in the middle, which already resembled the rim of a rocky crater, with distinct black shadows in the indentations around its ring like edge. The rim, bristling with crystallized accumulations of silver ions, stretched beyond the edge of the microscope's field. Murky outlines of half-fused, twisting protein chains came into view, as if seen through opalescent water. When I had one such tangle of ruined proteins in the cross-hairs, I gradually turned the dial to bring the magnification up further and still further. Any moment now I'd reach the limit of this journey into the depths. The flattened shadow of a single molecule was filling the picture; the mist was clearing now!

But nothing happened. I ought to have seen a trembling haze of atoms, like a quaking jelly, but it wasn't there. The screen glowed pure silver. I turned the dial all the way to the maximum. The hum intensified angrily, but still I didn't see anything. A repeated buzz let me know the apparatus was overloaded. I looked one more time into the silver emptiness and turned off the electricity.

I looked over at Harey. She was just opening her mouth in a yawn that she turned adroitly into a smile.

"So how am I?" she asked.

"You're fine," I said. "In my view. . . you couldn't be better."

I kept staring at her, once again feeling that crawling sensation in my lower lip. What had actually happened? What did it mean? This body, seemingly so slender and frail—in fact indestructible—at its deepest level had turned out to be made of nothingness? I thumped the cylindrical casing of the microscope. Maybe there was something wrong with it? Maybe the force fields weren't centering? No, I knew the equipment was in order. I'd gone down through all the stages, cells, protein conglomerate, molecules, and they looked exactly as they had on thousands of slides I'd seen. But the last step downwards led nowhere.

I drew some blood from her vein and poured it into a measuring glass. I separated it into portions and prepared it for analysis. It took

me longer than I expected; I was out of practice. The reactions were within expected norms. All of them. Unless. . .

I placed a drop of concentrated acid on the red dot in one of the test tubes. There was smoke; the dot turned gray and disappeared under a coating of dirty foam. This was decomposition. Denaturation. Keep going! I reached for another test tube. When I turned back, the thin glass container almost fell from my hand.

Beneath the layer of scum, at the very bottom of the tube a thin layer of dark red was already re-forming. This was nonsense! This was impossible!

“Kris!” I heard as if from very far away. “Kris, the telephone!”

“What? Oh, right, thanks.”

The phone had been ringing for a long time, but it was only now I heard it. I picked up the receiver.

“Kelvin here.”

“This is Snaut. I hooked it up so the three of us can hear each other at the same time.”

“Greetings, Dr. Kelvin,” came Sartorius’s high-pitched, nasal voice. Its owner sounded like he was walking onto a dangerously sagging platform—suspicious, cautious, while on the outside collected.

“My respects, Dr. Sartorius,” I replied. I felt like laughing, but I wasn’t sure I was clear enough about the reasons for my mirth to be able to give it free rein. When it came down to it, who was I supposed to be laughing at? I was holding something in my hand: the test tube with the blood. I shook it. It had already congealed. Maybe what I’d just seen was merely an illusion? Maybe it had merely seemed that way?

“Gentlemen, I’d like to raise certain issues concerning the. . .um. . . ghosts.” I heard and at the same time did not hear Sartorius. It was as if he was trying to enter my consciousness. I fought off his voice, still staring at the test tube with the dried blood.

“Let’s call them G-formations,” suggested Snaut quickly.

“Very good.”

In the middle of the screen there was a black vertical line to show I was receiving two channels at once. There should have been the faces of my interlocutors on either side. But the image was dark, only the narrow border of light around the edge showed that the equipment was working but that the screens had been covered over.

“Each of us has conducted various tests.” The nasal voice once again carried the same tone of caution. There was a moment of silence. “Perhaps we could first share what we have discovered, and then I can explain the conclusions I myself have reached. . . You first,

perhaps, Dr. Kelvin. . .”

“Me?” I said. I suddenly sensed Harey’s eyes on me. I placed the test tube on the table, where it rolled against a stand, and sat on a tall stool I’d pulled up with my foot. In the first moment I was going to refuse, but I surprised myself by saying:

“Fine. A short colloquium? Fine! I’ve done very little, but I can talk. One histological smear and a few reactions. Microreactions. I have the impression that—”

Up till this moment I’d had no idea what to say. All of a sudden it was as if something opened up inside me.

“—Everything is normal, but it’s camouflage. A mask. In some sense it’s a supercopy—a re-creation more exact than the original. That’s to say, where in humans we encounter the limits of granularity, the limits of divisibility of matter, here the road goes further, thanks to the use of subatomic building matter!”

“Just a moment. What do you mean by that?” inquired Sartorius. Snaut said nothing. Or perhaps it was his quickening breathing that could be heard on the line? Harey looked across at me. I became aware of how excited I was. I’d almost shouted the last words. I calmed down, hunched over on my uncomfortable perch, and closed my eyes. How could I phrase it?

“The ultimate structural element of our bodies is the atom. I suspect that G-formations are built of units smaller than regular atoms. Much smaller.”

“Mesons?” suggested Sartorius. He wasn’t at all surprised.

“No, not mesons. . . Mesons would be visible. The resolution of my apparatus here downstairs is ten to the minus twentieth ångströms. Right? But nothing can be seen, all the way to the max. So it isn’t mesons. More likely neutrinos.”

“How do you imagine that? After all, neutrino conglomerates are unstable. . .”

“I don’t know. I’m not a physicist. Maybe they’re stabilized by some kind of force field. It’s not my area. In any case, if it’s like I say, then the building matter consists of particles about ten thousand times smaller than atoms. But that’s not all! If the protein molecules and cells were constructed directly from these “micro-atoms” they’d have to be correspondingly smaller. And the blood corpuscles, the enzymes, everything. But they’re not. That means that all the proteins, cells, cell nuclei—they’re all just a mask! The actual structure responsible for the functioning of the ‘guest’ is hidden deeper.”

“For goodness’ sake, Kelvin!” Snaut almost yelled. I broke off in dismay. Had I said “guest”?! Yes, but Harey hadn’t heard it. Besides, she wouldn’t have understood. She was staring out of the window, her

head resting on her hands; her small neat profile stood out against the crimson dawn. There was silence in the receiver. I could only hear distant breathing.

"There's something in that," Snaut murmured.

"Yes, it's possible," added Sartorius. "The only problem is that the ocean is not composed of these hypothetical particles of Kelvin's. It's made of regular ones."

"Perhaps it's able to synthesize the other kind too," I commented. I felt a sudden sense of apathy. The conversation wasn't even amusing. It was unnecessary.

"That would explain their extraordinary fortitude," Snaut said, still in a murmur. "And the speed of regeneration. Perhaps even their energy source is there, in the depths; remember they don't need to eat. . ."

"I wish to say something," put in Sartorius. I couldn't stand him. If he'd only step out of the role he'd imposed upon himself!

"I would like to raise the question of motivation. The motivation for the appearance of the G-formations. I would break it down as follows: What are G-formations? They are not persons, nor are they copies of specific individuals, but rather materialized projections of what our brain contains regarding a particular person."

The accuracy of this observation struck me. Sartorius may have been unlikeable, but he was far from stupid.

"That's good," I put in. "It even explains why these peo. . . these formations have appeared and not others. What's been selected are the most enduring memory traces, those most isolated from all the others, though naturally no such trace can be completely separated, and in the course of being 'copied' the remains of other traces that happen to be in the vicinity are, or can be, included. As a result, the newcomer sometimes shows more knowledge than could be possessed by the real person whose reproduction they're supposed to be. . ."

"Kelvin!" said Snaut once again. I was struck by the fact that only he was irked by my careless words. Sartorius seemed unconcerned by them. Could this mean that his guest was by nature less intelligent than Snaut's? For a split second I imagined some cretinous dwarf at the side of the learned Dr. Sartorius.

"Indeed, we have observed such a thing," said the man himself. "Now, as concerns the motivation for the appearance of G-formations. . . The first and as it were natural thought is that an experiment is being conducted upon us. Yet it would not be a terribly impressive one. When we perform an experiment we learn from the results, in particular from our mistakes, so when we repeat it we introduce corrections. . . Yet there is no question of that here. The same G-

formations reappear. . . unimproved. . . with no additional protections against our. . . attempts to get rid of them. . .”

“In a word, there’s no cycle of action with a corrective reflex loop, as Dr. Snaut would term it,” I remarked. “What does that mean?”

“Only that as an experiment it would be shoddy work, which in fact is rather unlikely. The ocean is. . . precise. This is manifest in the double-layered construction of the G-formations, for a start. To a certain point they behave like the real. . .their real. . .”

He was unable to finish.

“Originals,” Snaut suggested quickly.

“Yes, originals. But where the situation exceeds the normal possibilities of the, um, original, there occurs something like a ‘disconnection of consciousness’ in the G-formation and another kind of action, of an inhuman nature, is directly observed. . .”

“That’s true,” I said, “but in this way all we’re doing is compiling a catalogue of behaviors of these. . . these formations, nothing more. This is utterly futile.”

“I’m not so certain of that,” protested Sartorius. All at once I realized what it was about him that irritated me so: he didn’t speak but gave speeches, as if he were taking part in a conference at the Institute. Evidently this was the only way he knew how.

“The matter of individuality arises here. The ocean is entirely devoid of such a concept. This has to be the case. It seems to me, gentlemen, it is completely oblivious to what for us is the most, um, troublesome, shocking aspect of the experiment, that it lies beyond the boundaries of its comprehension.”

“You think it’s unintentional. . . ?” I asked. This assertion took me aback, but after a moment’s reflection I admitted it couldn’t be dismissed.

“That’s right. I don’t believe in any villainy, malice, a desire to hurt us as painfully as possible. . . Unlike Dr. Snaut.”

“I don’t attribute human emotions to it at all,” said Snaut, speaking up for the first time, “but tell us, how do you explain these perpetual returns?”

“Perhaps they set up some kind of device that operates over and over again, like a gramophone record,” I said, not without a hidden urge to needle Sartorius.

“Now then, gentlemen, let us not become distracted,” the latter declared in his nasal voice. “That is not all I wished to say. Under normal conditions I would regard the submission of even an interim report on my research as premature, but in light of this particular

situation I shall make an exception. I have the impression, I repeat, I have the impression, no more for the moment, that Dr. Kelvin's conjecture is correct. I am referring to his hypothesis about a neutrino-based structure. Such structures are known to us only theoretically, we were not aware they could be stabilized. This opens up a specific opportunity, since the destruction of the force field that provides permanence for the structure. . ."

For some time I'd been noticing that the dark object covering the screen at Sartorius's end was shifting; at the very top of the image a bright gap appeared and something pink could be seen moving there slowly. Now the object suddenly slipped off.

"Go away! Go away!!" came an ear-splitting shout from Sartorius. In the unexpectedly lit-up screen, between the doctor's arms, clad in puffy oversleeves of the kind worn in laboratories, that were wrestling with something, a large golden disk-like object flashed into view and everything went dark before I'd realized the golden circle was a straw hat. . .

"Snaut?" I said after taking a deep breath.

"Yes, Kelvin," the cybernetician's tired voice replied. At that moment I suddenly felt that I liked him. I truly preferred not to know who his companion was. "We've had enough for the moment, no?"

"I think you're right," I replied. "Listen, if you can, swing by downstairs or to my cabin, OK?" I added in a hurry before he hung up.

"All right," he said. "Though I don't know when it'll be."

And so ended the discussion of the problem.

In the middle of the night I was woken by a light. I propped myself up on my elbow, covering my eyes with my other hand. Harey was wrapped in the bedsheet; she was sitting at the foot of the bed, hunched over, her hair falling across her face. Her shoulders were shaking. She was crying soundlessly.

“Harey!”

She curled up even more.

“What’s wrong? Harey. . .”

I sat up on the bed, still not entirely awake, slowly disengaging from the nightmare that had been stifling me a moment ago. The girl was trembling. I put my arms around her. She pushed me away with her elbow and hid her face.

“Darling.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Harey, for goodness’ sake, what is it?”

I saw her quivering, tear-stained face. Big childlike teardrops were rolling down her cheeks; they glistened in the dimple on her chin and fell onto the sheet.

“You don’t want me.”

“Where did you get that idea!”

“I heard.”

I could feel my whole face stiffening.

“What did you hear? You misunderstood, it was only. . .”

“No. No. You were saying it isn’t me. That I should go away. I would, God I would, but I can’t. I don’t know what it is. I wanted to and I can’t. I’m so, I’m so bad!”

“Come on, kid!”

I snatched her up, pulled her to myself as hard as I could, everything was falling apart. I kissed her hands, her wet salty fingers, I repeated entreaties, oaths, I apologized, I said it was a stupid nasty dream. She gradually calmed down. She stopped crying. Her eyes were huge, somnambulistic. They dried. She turned her head away.

“No,” she said, “don’t say all that, there’s no need. You’re not the same towards me either. . .”

“I’m not!”

It came out like a groan.

“That’s right. You don’t want me. I felt it the whole time. I pretended not to see it. I thought I was maybe just imagining it or

something. But no. You're behaving. . . differently. You don't take me seriously. It was a dream, that's true, but you were dreaming me. You called me by my name. You were disgusted. Why? Why?!"

I knelt in front of her and put my arms around her knees.

"Come on now, kid."

"I don't want you to talk like that. I don't want it, you hear? I'm not a kid. I'm. . ."

She burst out sobbing and fell face down on the bed. I stood up. Cool air blew from the air vents with a faint rustle. I was cold. I threw on a bath robe, sat on the bed and touched her shoulder.

"Harey, listen to me. I want to tell you something. I want to tell you the truth. . ."

She sat up, gently leaning her weight on her hands. I could see the pulse beating beneath the thin skin on her neck. My face went numb again and I felt as cold as if I'd been standing on ice. My head was completely empty.

"The truth?" she said. "Cross your heart?"

I didn't answer right away. I had to overcome a constriction in my throat. That was our old phrase. When it was uttered, neither of us dared lie, nor even remain silent on whatever it was about. There was a time we tormented one another with excessive honesty in the naive belief it would save us.

"Cross my heart," I said solemnly. "Harey. . ."

She waited.

"You've changed too. We all change. But that wasn't what I wanted to say. It really looks as if. . . for a reason neither of us fully understands. . . you're not able to be apart from me. But that's not such a bad thing, because with you too, I'm not able to. . ."

"Kris!"

I picked her up, wrapped in the sheet. A corner of it, wet with tears, fell on my shoulder. I walked around the cabin, rocking her. She stroked my face.

"No. You haven't changed. It's me," she whispered in my ear. "There's something wrong with me. Maybe that?"

She was staring at the dark empty rectangle where the broken door had been; I'd taken what was left of it to the depository the previous evening. I'll need to put a new one up, I thought to myself. I laid her on the bed.

"Do you even sleep at all?" I asked, standing over her with my arms dangling.

"I don't know."

“What do you mean, you don’t know? Think about it, darling.”

“I don’t think it’s real sleep. Maybe I’m sick. I lie here and think, and you know. . .”

She shuddered.

“What is it?” I asked in a whisper, knowing my voice might fail me.

“They’re really strange thoughts. I don’t know where they come from.”

“Like what for example?”

I have to stay calm, I thought to myself, whatever I hear, and I steeled myself for her words as if for a powerful blow.

She shook her head, at a loss.

“It’s just kind of. . . all around. . .”

“I don’t follow. . . ?”

“As if it weren’t just inside me, but further away, kind of, I can’t explain. There aren’t words to express it. . .”

“It’s probably dreams,” I said in an offhand way, and breathed a sigh of relief. “Now let’s turn off the light and not worry about anything till morning, and if we feel like it, in the morning we’ll look for some new worries, OK?”

She reached out for the switch and darkness fell. I lay down on the cold bedding and felt the warmth of her breath drawing closer.

I put my arm around her.

“Tighter,” she whispered. Then after a long while: “Kris!”

“What?”

“I love you.”

I felt like screaming.

The dawn was red. The huge disk of the sun hung low over the horizon. There was a letter on the threshold. I tore open the envelope. Harey was in the bathroom; I could hear her humming to herself. From time to time she popped her head around the door, her hair all wet. I went up to the window and read:

Kelvin, we’re gotten bogged down. Sartorius is arguing for vigorous steps. He believes he’ll be able to destabilize the neutrino systems. For his experiments he needs a certain amount of plasma as initial G-matter. He’s proposing that you go on a reconnaissance and gather some plasma in a container. Do whatever you think right, but let us know your decision. I have no opinion either way. I don’t think I have anything at all anymore. I’d prefer you to do it, but only so we can

move forward, or at least look as if we are. Otherwise there's nothing left but to envy G.

Rat

PS Don't come to the radio station. That you can still do for me. Best of all is to telephone.

My heart sank as I read the letter. I looked it over carefully one more time, tore it up and threw the scraps into the sink. Then I started looking for a space suit for Harey. That alone was awful. It was exactly like the last time. But she knew nothing about it, otherwise she wouldn't have been so pleased when I told her I had to go on a short reconnaissance outside the Station and I'd like her to come along. We ate breakfast in the small galley (during which Harey barely swallowed a few mouthfuls) and went to the library.

I wanted to look over the literature on field problems and neutrino systems before I did what Sartorius wanted. I didn't know how I was going to go about it, but I'd decided to keep an eye on what he was doing. It had occurred to me that this as-yet nonexistent neutrino annihilator could liberate Snaut and Sartorius, while I waited out the operation with Harey somewhere on the outside—in an aircraft for example. For some time I pored over the electronic catalogue, asking it questions to which it responded either by spitting out a slip of paper that read laconically “not in bibliography,” or inviting me into such a jungle of specialized research in physics that I didn't know where to begin. For some reason I had an urge to remain in that large circular room with its smooth walls covered in a checkerwork of drawers with their multitudes of microfilms and electronic records. The library was located in the very center of the Station; as such it had no windows and was the most isolated place inside the steel shell. Who knows if that wasn't the reason I felt so good there, despite the absolute failure of my search. I wandered about the large space till finally I came to a stop in front of a huge bookcase, reaching up to the ceiling and filled with books. It wasn't so much an indulgence, and a very dubious one at that, as a respectful memorial to the pioneers of solaristic exploration: the shelves, on which there were perhaps six hundred volumes, contained all the classics of the discipline, starting with Giese's already mostly outdated nine-volume monograph. I took out the tomes, so heavy they made my hand droop, and flipped through them idly as I perched on the arm of a chair. Harey also found herself a book—I read a few lines of it over her shoulder. It was one of the few books that had belonged to the first expedition, and had probably been owned by Giese himself—*The Interplanetary Chef*. I didn't say anything, seeing the attentiveness with which Harey was studying recipes adapted for the austere conditions

of space travel, and I returned to the venerable volume I had on my lap. *Ten Years of Research on Solaris* had appeared in the “Solariana” series as numbers four through thirteen, while the most recent additions to the series were in the four digits.

Giese had not been especially inspired, but such a quality can only hinder a scholar of Solaris—it may well be that imagination and the ability to formulate rapid hypotheses is nowhere more harmful. After all, on that planet anything is possible. Far-fetched descriptions of configurations formed by the plasma are in all likelihood true, though usually unconfirmable, since the ocean rarely repeats its evolutions. Those observing them for the first time are staggered above all by their outlandishness and their vast scope. If they’d taken place on a small scale, in some swamp, they’d probably be written off as a freak of nature, a manifestation of randomness and the blind play of forces. The fact that geniuses and mediocre minds are equally at a loss when faced with the inexhaustible variety of forms of Solaris is an additional hindrance in dealing with the marvels of the living ocean. Giese, though, was neither the one nor the other. He was simply a pedantic classifier, one of those whose outer calm concealed an unflagging passion that consumed his whole life. As long as he was able, here lied exclusively on the language of description; when words failed him he managed by creating new words, often infelicitous ones that did not match the phenomena they were intended to describe. When all’s said and done, though, no terms can convey what goes on on Solaris. Its “dendromountains,” its “extensors,” “megamushrooms,” “mimoids,” “symmetriads” and “asymmetriads,” its “vertebrids” and “rapidos” sound terribly artificial, but they do give some idea of Solaris even to those who’ve seen nothing but a few blurry photographs and poor quality films. Of course, even this conscientious classifier was guilty of rash moments. Humans are constantly coming up with hypotheses, even when they’re being cautious, and even though they’re quite unaware of it. Giese believed that extensors constituted a root form, and he compared them to greatly magnified and heightened versions of tidal waves in terrestrial oceans. Besides, anyone who’s immersed himself in the first edition of the work knows that he originally named them precisely “tides” led by a geocentrism that would be amusing if it weren’t for his helplessness. For—if comparisons with Earth really do have to be employed—these are formations larger in magnitude than Colorado’s Grand Canyon, modeled in a substance that on the outside has the consistency of jelly and foam (though the foam hardens into vast, brittle garlands, into tracery with immense holes, while some scientists have seen it as “skeletal excrescences”). Within, it turns into an ever firmer substance, like a flexed muscle, but one that quickly, at a depth of fifty feet or so,

grows harder than rock, though it retains its elasticity. Extending for several miles between walls that stretch like membranes over the monster's back and cling to its huge "skeleton" is the actual extensor, a seemingly independent formation, like a colossal python that has swallowed an entire mountain chain and is now digesting it in silence, from time to time setting its body in slow, shuddering, fishlike contractions. But this is only what the extensor looks like from above, from the cabin of an aircraft. When you get close enough to it that the walls of the ravine rise hundreds of yards above the plane, the python's torso turns out to be a moving expanse that stretches all the way to the horizon and is so dizzying it takes on the look of a passively bulging cylinder. The first impression is of a whirl of slick gray-green slime whose layers throw off powerful glints of sunlight; but when the craft hovers right over the surface (at such moments the edges of the ravine in which the extensor is concealed are like heights on either side of a geological depression), it can be seen that the motions are much more complex. They possess their own concentric rotations, darker streams intersect, and at times the outer mantle becomes a mirrored surface reflecting clouds and sky and shot through with loud explosive eruptions of its half-fluid, half-gaseous center. It slowly becomes clear that right below you is the central point of the forces holding up the parted sides that soar high into the sky and are composed of sluggishly crystalizing jelly; but what is evident to the eye is not so readily accepted by science. For years and years there were furious discussions about what was actually happening within an extensor, millions of which litter the vastnesses of the living ocean. It was thought they were some sort of organs of the monster, in which it metabolizes matter or which contain processes of breathing, the transfer of nutrition, and other things now known only to dusty library shelves. Every hypothesis was eventually disproved by a thousand painstaking and often perilous experiments. And all this concerned only the extensors, when it came down to it the simplest and most enduring form, for their existence lasts several weeks—something quite exceptional here.

One highly complex, capricious form that stirs the fiercest resistance in the viewer—a resistance that is, of course, instinctive—is the mimoids. It can be said without exaggeration that Giese fell in love with them, and to the very end he devoted himself to exploring them, describing them, and puzzling out their essence. With the name he strove to convey what for humans is most curious about them: a tendency to imitate the forms around them, whether close or remote.

On a certain day, deep below the surface of the ocean there appears the darkening shape of a broad flat circle that has ragged sides and is as if coated with tar. After twelve or fifteen hours it

becomes layered, is more and more visibly segmented, and at the same time thrusts upwards toward the surface. The observer could swear that beneath him a violent struggle is taking place, because endless series of synchronous circular waves flow in from all around like shrinking mouths, like living, muscled, closing craters; they pile up on top of the swaying blackish phantom lying in the depths and, first rising vertically, they plummet downwards. Each such plunge of hundreds of thousands of tons is accompanied by a sticky, almost smacking rumble that goes on for several seconds, because here everything happens on a monstrous scale. The dark formation is forced downwards; each successive impact seems to flatten and spread it. From individual layers, which droop like wet wings, elongated clusters break loose; they narrow into long necklaces, fuse together and drift upwards, drawing with them the fragmented mother disk, which has as it were adhered to them; in the meantime successive rings of waves are continuing incessantly to descend from above into a huge and ever more distinctly concave circle. This game can go on for a day, or it can last a whole month. Sometimes that's the end of it. The conscientious Giese labeled such a variant an "abortive mimoid" as though, from who-knew-where, he possessed the certain knowledge that the ultimate goal of every such upheaval was a "mature mimoid," that is to say, the colony of polyp-like, light-skinned excrescences (usually larger than a terrestrial city) whose destiny is to copy external forms. . . It goes without saying that another solaricist came along, by the name of Uyvens, who on the contrary determined that this last phase was a "degenerative" one, a degradation, an atrophy, and that the forest of created shapes was an evident manifestation of the branching formations freeing themselves from the control of the matrix.

Giese, however—who in all his descriptions of other formations on Solaris proceeded like an ant climbing a frozen waterfall, allowing nothing to distract him from the regular tread of his dry language—was in this case so sure of being right that he classified the successive phases of the mimoid's emergence in a sequence of increasing perfection.

Seen from high up, a mimoid looks like a city; but this is an illusion arising from the need for any sort of analogy with something familiar. When the sky is clear, all the multistory growths and their crowning palisades are surrounded by a layer of heated air that makes the shapes, already hard to determine, look as if they were swaying and bending. The first cloud crossing the blue (I use this expression out of habit, because this "blue" is ruddy during the red day and terrifyingly white during the blue one) brings an immediate response. An abrupt gemmation begins: a malleable skin, almost completely

separate from the base and swelling out like a cauliflower, is projected upwards; simultaneously it grows pale, and in a few minutes it offers a perfect imitation of the puffy cloud. This huge object casts a reddish shadow. Some of the mimoid's peaks seem to pass it on to others; this movement always takes place in the opposite direction to the movement of the real cloud. I think Giese would have given his right arm to know at the very least why this happens. But such "isolated" creations of the mimoid are nothing in comparison with the elemental activity it displays when it is "stimulated" by the presence of objects and shapes appearing above it due to the actions of terrestrial visitors.

The re-creation of forms essentially includes anything to be found within a radius of up to eight or nine miles. More often than not the mimoid produces magnified copies; at times it distorts them, creating caricatures or grotesque simplifications, especially of machines. It goes without saying that the material is always the same, a rapidly decoloring mass that, when flung into the air, instead of falling hangs there, joined by easily broken umbilical cords to the base, across which it crawls, at the same time contracting, narrowing or expanding as it fluidly assumes the most complex patterns. Aircraft, grate, or mast are reproduced with equal rapidity; the mimoid fails to respond only to people, or to be precise, to any living beings, including plants, because these too were brought to Solaris for research purposes by indefatigable scientists. Whereas a mannequin, a human doll, a figure of a dog or tree made in any material whatsoever is instantly imitated.

And here, unfortunately, it needs to be said in parentheses that this "obedience" on the part of the mimoid toward the scientists, so unusual on Solaris, is sometimes suspended. The most mature mimoid has its "lazy days" during which it does nothing but pulsate very slowly. This pulsation, incidentally, is not visible to the eye; its rhythm, a single beat of the pulse, happens once every two hours, and stop motion photography was needed to discover it.

In such circumstances a mimoid, especially an old one, is perfect for visiting, since both the base disk, fixed deep in the ocean, and the formations rising from it offer entirely firm support for the feet.

Of course, it's also possible to be inside a mimoid on its "busy" days, but at such moments visibility is close to zero because of the incessant precipitation of flaky colloidal suspension, the off-white color of powdery snow, which constantly falls from the swollen branches of the abdomen as it manufactures its imitated forms. In fact these forms cannot be perceived from close up, due to their mountainous immensity. In addition, the base of a "working" mimoid grows slimy from the dense rain, which only hours later hardens into a solid shell many times lighter than pumice. In the final stages, without the right equipment it's easy to get lost in the labyrinth of

bulging stalks that look a little like retractable columns, a little like semi-liquid geysers, even in full sunlight, since the sun's rays cannot penetrate the cover of "imitative explosions" being thrown up into the atmosphere.

Observing a mimoid on its happy days (which are, to be precise, the happy days of the scientist who finds himself close by) can be an unforgettable experience. They have their "creative frenzy" when they commence an extraordinary hyper-production. At these times they make either their own variations on external forms, more complex versions of them, or even "formal extensions," and they can entertain themselves in this way for hours, to the delight of the abstract artist and the despair of the researcher, who strives in vain to comprehend any of the emerging processes. At times the mimoid's activity includes utterly childlike simplifications; sometimes it engages in "baroque deviations," at which moments all it creates is marked by bulging elephantiasis. Old mimoids in particular fabricate shapes that can induce a hearty chuckle. True, I myself have never been able to laugh at them, having always been overly awed by the mystery of the spectacle.

It goes without saying that in the early years the scientists literally pounced on mimoids as supposedly perfect centers of the Solarian ocean, as places where the longed-for contact between two civilizations would take place. Yet it transpired only too quickly that such contact was out of the question, since everything began and ended with an imitation of shapes leading nowhere.

The anthropomorphism and zoomorphism constantly present in the scientists' desperate quests saw the ever newer productions of the living ocean as "sense organs" or even "limbs," which for some time scholars such as Maartens or Ekkonai perceived in Giese's vertebrids and rapidos. Yet these protuberances of the living ocean, sometimes soaring two miles into the atmosphere, are no more its limbs than an earthquake is gymnastic exercise for the earth's crust.

The list of forms that occur relatively regularly, and are produced by the ocean sufficiently often that several dozen or even several hundred can be found on its surface in the course of an average day, runs to three hundred or so items. The most un-human, meaning those that bear absolutely no resemblance to anything experienced by humankind on Earth, are according to the Giese school the symmetriads. Even back then it was well established that the ocean did not behave aggressively, and one could perish in its plasmic depths only by truly striving to do so through one's own imprudence or carelessness (naturally I don't include accidents caused by malfunctioning equipment such as a damaged oxygen tank or cooling apparatus); and that even the cylindrical rivers of extensors and the

monstrous pillars of vertebrids could be flown through in a airplane or other flying machine without the slightest danger. The plasma allowed free passage, parting before the foreign body at the equivalent of the speed of sound in the atmosphere of Solaris, and when forced to, even creating deep tunnels far beneath the surface of the ocean. (The energy it mobilized at such moments was massive—Skriabin calculated that in extreme cases it could amount to 10⁹ ergs!) Symmetriads were investigated with exceptional caution, constantly drawing back, adopting multiple safety measures (though, truth be told, these were often bogus); the names of those who first explored them are known to every child on Earth.

The direness of these giants doesn't lie in their appearance, though that can truly induce nightmares. It rather arises from the fact that within them nothing is stable or certain; even the laws of physics are suspended. It was always those studying symmetriads who proclaimed most vociferously the thesis that the living ocean was rational.

Symmetriads arise without warning. Their beginning is a kind of eruption. About an hour beforehand, the ocean begins to gleam, as if it's been covered with glass over an area of tens of square miles. Other than this, its fluidity and the rhythm of its waves remain unchanged. At times a symmetriad emerges where there is a funnel from an absorbed rapido, but this is not a rule. After an hour or so, the glassy coating rises upwards in a monstrous bubble that reflects the entire sky, sun and clouds and the whole horizon, shimmering and glinting. The lightning play of colors, caused partly by the curvature and partly by refraction of the light, has no parallel.

Particularly striking effects of light are produced by symmetriads that arise during the blue day and immediately before sunset. At such times it looks as if the planet is giving birth to another one, doubling its volume with every moment. The moment the globe with its flaming shimmer bursts from the depths, it splits at its highest point into vertical sectors, but it isn't disintegrating. This stage, rather clumsily labeled the "calycate phase," lasts only seconds. The arches of membranous spans rising into the sky become inverted, link up in the unseen interior and instantly begin to form something along the lines of a squat torso within which hundreds of things happen at once. In the very center, which was first studied by the seventy-person Hamalei expedition, a process of gigantocrystalization and polycrystalization leads to the emergence of an axial supporting pivot sometimes called a "spine," though I am not a fan of the term. The precipitous architecture of this central pillar is held up *in statu nascendi*—as it is being born—by vertical columns of a jelly so diluted it's almost watery, bursting endlessly from the mile-deep recesses.

During this process the colossus emits a prolonged hollow roar, and is encircled by a shaft of snowy, coarse-celled foam that quakes furiously. There then follow, moving from the center to the periphery, extraordinarily complex revolutions of the hardened planes on which the layers of ductile matter rising from below have accumulated, while at the same time the deep-ocean geysers mentioned above condense and transform into mobile tentacle-like columns; clusters of them reach toward loci of construction that are strictly determined by the dynamics of the whole, recalling some sort of immense gills of an embryo growing a thousand times faster than normal, and streaming with pinkish blood and a green water so dark it's almost black. From this moment the symmetriad begins to manifest its most extraordinary quality: the modeling or even suspension of laws of physics. Let us begin by saying that no two symmetriads are alike and that the geometry of each is, as it were, an "invention" of the living ocean. So then, the symmetriad produces in its interior things that are often called "instant machines," though these formations bear no resemblance to machines constructed by people—the term only refers to a certain "mechanical" purposiveness of operation.

When the geysers erupting far beneath the ocean surface solidify or swell into thick-walled galleries and corridors that run in every direction, and the "membranes" form a system of intersecting planes, overhangs, and ceilings, the symmetriad justifies its name by the fact that each intricate arrangement of passages, pathways, and inclines within one of its poles has a faithful copy at the other.

After twenty or thirty minutes the giant slowly begins to sink, occasionally first leaning between eight and twelve degrees in the vertical axis. There are larger and smaller symmetriads, but even the dwarves rise a good two and a half thousand feet over the horizon after they begin to submerge, and can be seen from miles away. It's safest to enter their interior immediately after they reach stability, since the whole ceases to drop into the ocean, and at the same time it returns to the perfectly perpendicular. The best point of entry is the area just below the summit. In this place the relatively smooth polar "cap" is encircled by an area honeycombed with funnel-shaped openings to inner chambers and channels. This configuration constitutes, as a whole, a three-dimensional solution to a higher-order equation.

It's common knowledge that any equation can be expressed in the figural language of higher geometry, and a solid can be constructed that is its equivalent. In this understanding, a symmetriad is a relative of Lobachevsky's cones and Riemann's negative curvatures, but a very distant relative, due to its unimaginable complexity. Occupying an area of several cubic miles, it constitutes the solution to an entire

mathematical system; this solution, furthermore, is four-dimensional, since certain essential coefficients in the equation are also expressed in time, that is to say, in the changes brought about by its passing.

Naturally, the simplest conception was that this was no more and no less than a “mathematical machine” of the living ocean, a model created on its own scale for calculations it needed for some unknown purpose; but this idea, the Fermont Hypothesis, is no longer credited. It was tempting, to be sure; but the claim that these titanic eruptions, every tiny particle of which was constantly subject to the complicating formulas of the overall analysis, were being used by the living ocean to examine questions of matter, space, existence—this notion proved untenable. Too many phenomena were to be found in the giant’s innards that could not be reconciled with such a simple (some said childishly naive) depiction.

There was no lack of attempts to come up with an intelligible model of a symmetriad, a visualization of it. One popular explanation was offered by Averian, who presented the matter as follows. Imagine an ancient terrestrial building from Babylonian times. Let it be built out of a living, responsive, evolving substance. Its design proceeds fluidly through a series of phases, taking on, as we watch, the forms of Greek and Roman architecture. Then the columns begin to grow narrow as stalks, the ceiling loses its weight; it rises, sharpens, the arches turn into steep parabolas and eventually fold and soar. The Gothic that has appeared in this way begins to mature and age; it dissolves into late forms, its former precipitous severity replaced with eruptions of orgiastic exuberance. Before our eyes Baroque excess proliferates; and if we continue this sequence -- all the time regarding our changing formation as if it were the successive stages of a living being -- we’ll finally arrive at the architecture of the space center era, at the same time perhaps getting closer to understanding the nature of the symmetriad.

Yet this analogy, however it may be expanded and enriched (in fact, there were efforts to show it visually using special models and films), remains at best weak, at worst an evasion, if not a downright falsehood, for a symmetriad is unlike anything on Earth. . .

A human being is capable of taking in very few things at one time; we see only what is happening in front of us, here and now. Visualizing a simultaneous multiplicity of processes, however they may be interconnected, however they may complement one another, is beyond us. We experience this even with relatively simple phenomena. The fate of a single person can mean many things, the fate of several hundred is hard to encompass; but the history of thousands, millions, means essentially nothing at all. A symmetriad is millions, no, billions, to the n th power; it is unimaginability itself.

What of it if, in the recesses of one of its aisles that is a ten-fold version of a Kronecker space, we stand like ants holding onto the folds of a breathing vault, that we watch the rise of vast planes grayly opalescent in the light of our flares, their interpenetration, the softness and infallible perfection of their resolution, which only lasts a moment, for everything here is fluid—the content of this architecture is motion, intent and purposive. We observe a fragment of the process, the trembling of a single string in a symphonic orchestra of supergiants, and on top of that we know—we only know, without comprehending—that at the same time, above us and beneath us, in the plunging deep, beyond the limits of sight and imagination there are multiple, million fold simultaneous transformations connected to one another like the notes of musical counterpoint. For this reason someone gave them the name of geometric symphony, but if this is the case, we are its unhearing audience.

Here, in order to truly see anything at all, one would have to draw back rapidly, retreat to an immense distance; yet in a symmetriad all is internal, all is propagation, surging avalanches of births, endless shaping. At the same time each shaped thing is itself in the business of shaping other things, and no mimosa is as sensitive to a single touch, to the changes taking place where we stand, as the distant other pole of the symmetriad, miles away and separated by hundreds of stories. Here every momentary structure, with a beauty that attains its fulfillment beyond the limits of sight, is a co-creator and conductor of all the others that occur at the same time, and they in turn have a modeling influence on it. A symphony—very well, but a kind that writes itself and drowns itself out. Terrible is the end of the symmetriad. No one who sees it can resist the impression of witnessing a tragedy, if not a murder. After two, at the most three hours—this explosive growth, multiplication of itself, self-reproduction, never lasts longer—the living ocean goes on the offensive. It looks as follows: the smooth surface wrinkles over; the surf, calm now and covered with dried foam, starts to seethe; concentric series of waves rush in from the horizons. They form the same kind of muscle-bound craters as those that assist at the birth of a mimoid, though these ones are incomparably huger. The submerged part of the symmetriad is compressed and the colossus rises slowly upwards as if it were about to be flung from the planet; the upper layers of the ocean's glial matter move into action, they creep higher and higher up the symmetriad's side walls, covering them over, hardening, blocking up the passageways. But all this is nothing in comparison with what's taking place at the same time within. To begin with, the formative processes—the making of successive architectures—pause for a brief moment, then suddenly accelerate;

movements that up till now have been fluid, interpenetrations, foldings, the addition of foundations and ceilings, all of which has proceeded thus far smoothly and as surely as if it were to endure for centuries, begins to rush. There's an overwhelming sense that faced with imminent danger, the colossus is hurriedly moving towards some kind of consummation. Yet the greater the speed of the transformations, the more glaring the terrible, horrific metamorphosis of the material itself and its dynamics. All the soaring, magically curving planes soften, grow flaccid, droop; there begin to appear lapses, unfinished forms, grotesque, misshapen. A gathering roar rises from the unseen depths; air, expelled as if in death throes and rubbing against the narrowing channels, wheezing and thundering in the passageways, stimulates the collapsing ceilings to a wail as if from lifeless vocal cords or monstrous throats overgrown with stalactites of slime, and despite the furious movement that has been unleashed—it is, after all, the movement of destruction—the spectator is immediately overcome by a sense of utter deadness. By this point the towering construction is supported only by the gale howling from the abyss, passing through it via a thousand shafts, inflating the structure, which begins to slide downwards, collapse like a plaster statue caught in the flames, though here and there the last twitchings can still be seen, incoherent movements disconnected from the rest, blind, ever weaker, till the huge mass, undermined and exposed to constant attack from outside, collapses with the slowness of a mountain and vanishes in a confusion of foam like that which accompanied its titanic appearance.

And what does all this mean? Yes indeed, what does it mean. . .

I remember a school tour visiting the Solaris Institute in Aden when I was Gibarian's assistant. After passing through a side area of the library, the young people were led into its main room, which is mostly filled with boxes of microfilms. They contain images of brief moments from the interior of symmetriads which themselves, of course, are long gone. There are over ninety thousand of them—reels, that is, not photographs. And then a plump girl of perhaps fifteen, in glasses, with a resolute and intelligent expression, suddenly asked:

“What's it all for?”

In the awkward silence that followed, the teacher gave her troublesome charge a stern look; but none of the solaricists accompanying the group (of whom I was one) could offer an answer. Because symmetriads are unique, as are most of the phenomena that take place in them. Sometimes the air ceases to conduct sound within them. Sometimes the refraction coefficient increases or decreases. Localized pulsing, rhythmic changes of gravitation occur, as if the symmetriad had a beating gravitational heart. Occasionally the

scientists' gyrocompasses would start to behave as if they'd gone mad; layers of intensified ionization would appear then vanish. The list goes on. Besides, if the mystery of the symmetriads is ever solved, there'll still be the asymmetriads. . .

They arise in a similar way, but they have a different end and nothing can be observed in them except for trembling, glowing, twinkling; we know only that they are the seat of dizzyingly rapid processes, at the limits of physically possible velocities, also known as "magnified quantum phenomena." Their mathematical resemblance to certain models of the atom is, however, so unstable and fleeting that some consider it a side effect or even something entirely accidental. They exist a much shorter time than symmetriads—only ten or fifteen minutes—and their end is perhaps even more terrible, because following the hurricane that fills them to bursting with hard, roaring air, with a hellish swiftness they become filled with a liquid that eddies beneath a coating of dirty foam, and that floods over everything, bubbling hideously, after which there follows an explosion like a volcano of mud erupting, tossing up a disheveled pillar of remnants that for a long time afterwards descend in a macerated rain on the unquiet surface of the ocean. Some of these pieces, carried on the wind—dry as sticks, yellowing, flat, and for this reason resembling membranous bones or cartilage—can be found drifting on the waves dozens of miles from the heart of the explosion.

A separate group comprises formations that detach themselves completely from the living ocean for a shorter or longer time. They are much less frequent than the previously mentioned phenomena, and much harder to observe. The first time fragments of them were found they were completely misidentified, it transpired much later, as the dead bodies of beings that dwelled in the ocean. At times they appear to be fleeing like strange multi-winged birds being pursued by the funnels of rapidos, but this concept, borrowed from Earth, once again becomes a wall that cannot be broken through. Sometimes, though only very infrequently, on the rocky shores of islands one can see groups of flightless creatures like pods of seals, basking in the sun or lazily crawling to the sea, so as to melt into it.

In this way everyone remained within the limitations of human, terrestrial concepts, while first contact. . .

Expeditions traveled hundred of miles deep inside symmetriads, setting up recording equipment and automatic film cameras; the television eyes of robot satellites captured the gemmation of mimoids and extensors, their maturation and decease. Libraries filled, archives grew; the cost was sometimes high. Seven hundred and eighteen people died in various disasters, having failed to withdraw in time from colossuses whose time had come. Of these, one hundred and six

perished in a single catastrophe that was infamous because their number included Giese himself, by that time an old man of seventy, when a formation that was a clear example of a symmetriad suddenly met the end that usually befalls an asymmetriad. Seventy-nine of the victims, wearing armored space suits, along with their apparatus and machinery, were swallowed up in a matter of seconds by an explosion of muddy slime whose offshoots struck down twenty-seven others piloting aircraft and helicopters above the formation being investigated. This place, at the intersection of the forty-second parallel and the eighty-ninth meridian, is marked on maps as the Eruption of the One Hundred and Six. But the point exists on maps alone, since in that place the surface of the ocean is no different than any of its other regions.

At that moment, for the first time in the history of research on Solaris, voices were heard calling for the use of thermonuclear strikes. It was to be in essence crueller than revenge: it would have meant the destruction of that which we cannot comprehend. Tsanken, the second-in-command of Giese's relief team, who survived only thanks to an error—the relay automat had incorrectly indicated the place where the others were studying the symmetriad, such that Tsanken traipsed about all over the ocean and only came to the right place literally minutes after the explosion, seeing the black mushroom cloud as he approached—at the moment when the decision to attack was being weighed, threatened he would blow up the Station along with himself and the other eighteen crew members remaining on it, and though it was never admitted that this suicidal ultimatum influenced the vote, it can be assumed such was the case.

But the times of such large expeditions visiting the planet are past. The Station itself—its construction, supervised from satellites, was an engineering venture on a scale Earth could have been proud of, were it not for the fact that the ocean produced out of itself structures a million times larger in the space of seconds—was built in the form of a disk with a diameter of six hundred and fifty feet, with four stories in the center and two around the edges. Suspended between fifteen hundred and five thousand feet above the ocean -- thanks to gravitors driven by annihilation energy, along with all the equipment usually found on Stations and large Satelloids of other planets -- it was additionally provided with special radar sensors that at the first change in the ocean's smooth surface would initiate extra power, bringing the steel disk up into the stratosphere the moment a new living formation showed signs of being born.

Now the Station was virtually deserted. Since the automats had been locked away in the cavernous depositories —for reasons still unknown to me—one could wander the corridors without meeting

anyone, like in a drifting wreck whose motors have survived the demise of its crew.

As I was setting the ninth volume of Giese's monograph back on the shelf I had the impression that the steel floor under its covering of thick foam plastic suddenly trembled beneath my feet. I froze, but the trembling didn't recur. The library was thoroughly insulated from the rest of the structure, and tremors could be caused by one thing only. A rocket had been launched from the Station. This thought brought me back to reality. I still hadn't fully made up my mind whether to go on the reconnaissance as Sartorius wanted. By acting as though I concurred with his plans in full, I could do no more than postpone the crisis; I was almost certain there'd be conflict, because I'd decided to do whatever I could to save Harey. The big question was whether there was a chance Sartorius might succeed. He had a huge advantage over me—as a physicist he knew the problem ten times better than I did, while I, paradoxically, could count only on the excellence of the solutions the ocean deigned to offer us. For the next hour I pored over microfilms, striving to extract any sense whatsoever from the sea of hellish mathematics that was the language spoken by the physics of neutrino processes. To begin with it seemed hopeless, the more so because there were as many as five extraordinarily difficult theories of the neutrino field, a clear indication that none of them was perfect. Yet I managed after all to find something promising. I was just copying out the formulas when there was a knock.

I went quickly to the door and cracked it open, blocking the gap with my body. Snaut's face appeared, glistening with perspiration. The corridor behind him was empty.

"Oh, it's you," I said, opening the door further. "Come in."

"Yes, it's me," he responded. His voice was hoarse, there were bags under his red eyes, and he was wearing a shiny rubber anti-radiation apron on elastic suspenders. Underneath it I could see the grubby legs of the same pants he always wore. His eyes ran around the circular, evenly lit space and came to a stop when he spotted Harey standing by an armchair at the far end of the library. We exchanged the briefest of glances, I lowered my eyelids, at which he gave a slight bow, and I said in a casual tone:

"Harey, this is Dr. Snaut. Snaut, this is. . . my wife."

"I'm. . . a very rarely seen member of the crew and that's why. . ."—the pause extended dangerously—"I've not had the opportunity to make your acquaintance. . ." Harey smiled and put out her hand which he shook, it seemed to me, with a certain astonishment. He blinked several times and stood staring at her till I took him by the arm.

"Excuse me," he said then to Harey. "I need a word with you, Kelvin. . ."

"Of course," I replied with the ease of a man about town; it all sounded to me like cheap comedy, but there was nothing to be done. "Harey, darling, don't mind us. Dr. Snaut and I have to talk about our boring scientific business."

And I led him at once to some small armchairs on the other side of the room. Harey dropped into the chair she'd been sitting in before, but she pushed it around in such a way that she could see us when she raised her eyes from her book.

"What is it?" I asked softly.

"I got divorced," he answered just as quietly, though his whisper had a sibilance about it. At one time I might have laughed at a story like that and such a conversation opener, but on the Station my sense of humor had been amputated. "I've lived through years since yesterday, Kelvin," he added. "A good few years. What's with you?"

"Not much," I answered after a moment, because I didn't know what to say. I liked him, but I sensed that at the present moment I needed to be on my guard with him, or rather with what he had come to me about.

"Not much?" he replied in the same tone as me. "I see, so that's how things are. . .?"

"What do you mean?" I said, pretending I didn't understand. He narrowed his bloodshot eyes and, leaning in so close I could feel the warmth of his breath on my face, he whispered:

"We're bogged down, Kelvin. I can't get a hold of Sartorius anymore, all I know is what I wrote you about what he said after that lovely little conference of ours. . ."

"He's turned off his visuphone?" I asked.

"No. There's a short circuit at his end. It looks like he did it deliberately, or maybe..." He made a movement with his fist as if he were smashing something. I looked at him without saying a word. The left corner of his mouth rose in a disagreeable smile.

"Kelvin, I came here because. . ."

He didn't finish.

"What do you intend to do?"

"You mean the letter. . .?" I replied slowly. "I can do it. I see no reason to refuse. Actually that's why I'm sitting here; I wanted to figure out—"

"No," he interrupted, "I didn't mean that. . ."

"No?" I said, feigning surprise. "Do tell."

"It's Sartorius," he murmured after a short pause. "He thinks he's

found a way. . . you know.”

He kept his gaze fixed on me. I sat there calmly, striving to make my expression look indifferent.

“First there’s that business with the X-rays. What Gibarian was doing with them, remember. It’s possible to modify it somewhat. . .”

“How?”

“All they were doing was sending a bundle of rays into the ocean and modulating their intensity according to different formulas.”

“Yes, I know about that. Nilin did it too. And a whole bunch of others.”

“Right, but they used soft radiation. This was the hard stuff; they packed everything they had into the ocean, the whole nine yards.”

“That could have unpleasant consequences,” I remarked. “It’s a violation of the Convention of the Four, and of UN restrictions.”

“Kelvin. . . Don’t act dumb. That’s neither here nor there at this point. Gibarian’s dead.”

“Oh, so Sartorius is thinking of blaming the whole thing on him?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t talked to him about it. That’s not important. Sartorius reckons that since guests only appear when we wake up, it must be extracting the prescription to produce them while we’re asleep. It thinks our most important state is sleep, precisely. That’s why it does what it does. So Sartorius wants to send it our waking state—our conscious thoughts. You follow?”

“How? By mail?”

“Save the jokes for later. The bundle of rays will be modified with the brain waves of one of us.”

It all suddenly became clear to me.

“Oh,” I said. “And that one of us would be me. Right?”

“Yes. He was thinking of you.”

“I’m deeply grateful.”

“What do you say?”

I was silent. Without a word he took an unhurried look at Harey where she sat immersed in her reading, then turned his gaze back to me. I felt I was turning pale; I couldn’t stop myself.

“Well?” he said.

I shrugged.

“All those X-ray sermons about the wonderfulness of humankind—that’s all nonsense in my view. Yours, too. Or am I wrong?”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Very well then,” he said and smiled, as if I’d granted his wish.

“So you’re opposed to this business of Sartorius’s?”

I didn’t yet understand what had happened, but from his expression I realized that he’d led me exactly where he wanted to. I didn’t speak—what could I have said at that juncture?

“Excellent,” he said. “Because there’s also another project. To adapt a Roche machine.”

“An annihilator. . . ?”

“Yes. Sartorius has already carried out the preliminary calculations. It’s doable. It won’t even require a lot of power. The machine will run twenty-four hours a day or for an unlimited time, to create an antifield.”

“W. . . wait! How do you envisage that?!”

“It’s very simple. It’ll be a neutrino antifield. Ordinary matter will remain untouched. The only thing to be destroyed will be. . . neutrino systems. You understand?”

He gave a satisfied smile. I sat there with my mouth agape. The smile gradually disappeared from his face. He frowned at me searchingly and waited.

“So Project Thought, the first one, we’re rejecting that. Right? And the second one? Sartorius is working on it already. We’re going to call it Project Freedom.”

I closed my eyes for a moment. I’d suddenly made up my mind. Snaut was not a physicist. Sartorius had turned his visuphone off or broken it. Very well.

“I’d call it rather Project Butchery,” I said slowly.

“You were a butcher yourself. Am I not right? Now things will be quite different. No guests, no G-formations—nothing. The moment the materialization appears, it’ll disintegrate.”

“You misunderstand,” I replied, shaking my head with a smile that I hoped looked sufficiently natural. “These aren’t moral scruples, they’re a survival instinct. I don’t want to die, Snaut.”

“What. . . ?”

He was taken aback. He gave me a suspicious look. From my pocket I pulled out the crumpled sheet of paper containing the formulas.

“I’ve been thinking about it too. Does that surprise you? After all, I was the first one to propose the neutrino hypothesis, you won’t deny that? So look: an antifield can be built. For ordinary matter it’s harmless. That much is true. But at the moment of destabilization, when the neutrino system begins to disintegrate, the energy of its bonds will be released as surplus. If we assume ten to the eighth ergs for every kilogram of rest mass, for one G-formation we get between

five and seven times ten to the eighth. Do you know what that means? The equivalent of a small uranium charge going off inside the Station.”

“What are you saying! But. . . surely Sartorius must have taken that into consideration. . .”

“Not necessarily,” I retorted with a malicious smile. “The thing is, Sartorius belongs to the Frazer and Cajolli school. According to them, at the moment of disintegration the entire energy of the bonds is released in the form of light radiation. There’d be just a powerful flash, maybe not completely safe, but not destructive. But there are other hypotheses, other theories of the neutrino field. According to Cayatt, according to Avalov, to Siona, the emission spectrum is much broader, with the maximum occurring as hard gamma radiation. It’s very nice that Sartorius trusts his masters and their theory, but there are others, Snaut. And you know what else?” I went on, seeing that my words had made an impression on him. “The ocean also needs to be taken into consideration. If it did what it did, for sure it used the best possible method. In other words: its activities seem to me an argument in favor of the other school and against Sartorius.”

“Let me see that paper, Kelvin. . .”

I handed it to him. He peered at it, trying to make sense of my scribblings.

“What’s that?” He pointed with his finger.

I took the paper back.

“That’s the field transmutation tensor.”

“Let me have it. . .”

“What do you need it for?” I asked. I knew what he’d say.

“I have to show Sartorius.”

“As you wish,” I replied indifferently. “You can take it. The point is, no one has tested this experimentally; we’ve never known these kinds of systems before. He believes in Frazer, I followed Siona in my calculations. He’ll tell you I’m not a physicist and that Siona isn’t either. At least not in his estimation. But that’s a matter for discussion. I’ve no wish to engage in a debate that could result in my being vaporized, to the greater glory of Sartorius. You I can convince, but not him. And I’m not going to try.”

“So what do you mean to do. . . ? He’s working on it,” said Snaut in a toneless voice. He hunched over; all his liveliness was gone. I didn’t know if he trusted me, but I no longer cared.

“What a person does when someone’s trying to kill him,” I replied quietly.

“I’ll try and get in touch with him. Maybe he’s planning some

safety measures,” murmured Snaut. He raised his eyes to me: “Listen, maybe the first project after all. . . ? Hm? Sartorius would agree. For sure. It’s. . . at least. . . a shot. . .”

“Do you believe that?”

“No,” he replied at once. “But. . . how could it hurt?”

I didn’t want to agree too readily, since that was what I wanted. He was becoming my ally in playing for time.

“I’ll think about it,” I said.

“All right, I’m off,” he mumbled, getting up. His bones cracked as he rose from the chair. “So you’ll let us make an encephalogram of you?” he asked, rubbing his apron with his fingers as if he were trying to erase an unseen stain.

“OK,” I said. Without looking at Harey (who was watching the scene silently, her book on her lap), he went to the door. When it closed behind him I stood up. I unfolded the paper I held in my hand. The formulas were good. I hadn’t doctored them. Though I’m not sure Siona would have recognized my solution. Probably not. I gave a start. Harey had come up behind me and touched me on the shoulder.

“Kris!”

“What is it, darling?”

“Who was that?”

“I told you. Dr. Snaut.”

“What kind of a person is he?”

“I don’t know him that well. Why do you ask?”

“He was looking at me in this strange way. . .”

“He probably found you attractive.”

“No,” she said with a shake of her head. “It wasn’t that kind of look. He was looking at me as if. . . as if he. . .”

She shuddered, raised her eyes at me then lowered them right away.

“Let’s go somewhere else. . .”

I had been lying in the dark room, in a trance, staring at the illuminated face of the watch on my wrist, for I don't know how long. I was listening to my own breathing and feeling surprised at something, but all of this—the staring at the greenish ring of figures, and the surprise—was steeped in an indifference I put down to exhaustion. I turned on my side. The bed was oddly wide, something was missing. I held my breath. There was absolute silence. I froze. Not the slightest whisper came from anywhere. Harey? Why couldn't I hear her breathing? I felt the bedding with my hand: I was alone.

“Harey!” I was about to call out, but I heard footsteps. It was someone large and heavy, like. . .

“Gibarian?” I said calmly.

“Yes, it's me. Don't turn the light on.”

“Really?”

“There's no need. That way it'll be better for both of us.”

“But you're dead?”

“It doesn't matter. I mean, you do recognize my voice?”

“Yes. Why did you do it?”

“I had to. You were four days late. If you'd gotten here sooner it might not have been necessary. But don't feel bad. I'm fine.”

“Are you really here?”

“Oh, you think you're dreaming, like you thought about Harey?”

“Where is she?”

“What makes you think I know?”

“I'm guessing you do.”

“Keep that thought to yourself. Let's just say I'm here instead of her.”

“I want her to be here as well.”

“That's not possible.”

“Why not? Look, you do know that really it's not you, it's me, right?”

“No. It's really me. If you wanted to be pedantic you could say it's me again. But let's not waste words.”

“Will you go away?”

“Yes.”

“And then she'll come back?”

“Is that what you want? What is she to you?”

“That's my business.”

“But you’re afraid of her.”

“No, I’m not.”

“And disgusted by her. . .”

“What do you want from me?”

“You can feel sorry for yourself, but not for her. She’s always going to be twenty years old. Don’t pretend you don’t know that!”

All of a sudden, I have no idea why, I calmed down. I listened to him with equanimity. I had the impression he was standing ever closer, at the foot of the bed, but I still couldn’t see anything in the darkness.

“What are you after?” I asked quietly. My tone seemed to surprise him. He was silent for a moment.

“Sartorius has convinced Snaut that you hoodwinked him. Now they’re doing the same to you. They’re pretending to assemble the X-ray equipment but they’re actually building a field annihilator.”

“Where is she?” I asked.

“Did you not hear what I just said to you? I’m trying to warn you!”

“Where is she?”

“I don’t know. Listen up: you’ll need a weapon. You can’t count on anyone.”

“I can count on Harey,” I said. I heard a low rapid sound. He was laughing.

“Sure you can. Up to a certain point. In the end you can always do what I did.”

“You’re not Gibarian.”

“How do you like that. And who am I? A dream of yours maybe?”

“No. Their puppet. But you don’t know it.”

“And how do you know who *you* are!”

That made me think. I wanted to get up but I couldn’t. Gibarian was saying something. I couldn’t understand the words, I only heard the sound of his voice; I was struggling desperately with the weakness of the flesh. I made one more colossal effort, jerked my body. . . and woke up. I gasped for air like a half-suffocated fish. It was completely dark. It had been a dream. A nightmare. But just a moment. . . “a dilemma we’re not able to resolve. We persecute our own selves. All Polytheria did was apply a kind of selective amplifier to our thoughts. Seeking a motivation for this is anthropomorphism. Where there are no humans, there are none of the motives available to humans. To continue the projected research we’d have had to destroy either our own thoughts or their material realization. The former is beyond our

powers. The latter looks too much like murder.”

In the darkness I listened to the distant, measured voice that I had recognized at once: it was Gibarian. I stretched out my hand. The bed was empty.

I’ve woken into another dream, I thought.

“Gibarian. . . ?” I said. The voice broke off at once in mid-word. There was a soft click and I felt a faint puff of air on my face.

“Really, Gibarian,” I muttered with a yawn. “Following someone from one dream into another, come off it. . .”

There was a rustling sound next to me.

“Gibarian!” I repeated more loudly.

The bedsprings moved.

“Kris. . . It’s me. . . ,” came a whisper right by me.

“Oh, it’s you, Harey. . . Where’s Gibarian?”

“Kris. . . Kris. . . surely he’s. . . you yourself said he died. . .”

“He might be alive in a dream,” I said slowly. I was no longer at all certain it had been a dream. “He was saying something. He was here,” I added. I was fearfully sleepy. If I’m sleepy, I must be asleep, I thought to myself idiotically. I brushed Harey’s cold arm with my lips and arranged myself more comfortably. She said something in reply, but I was already plunged in oblivion.

In the morning, in the red sunlight of the room, I recalled the events of the night. The conversation with Gibarian had been a dream, but the things that had happened next? I’d heard his voice, I could have sworn it; I just didn’t quite remember what he’d been saying. It hadn’t sounded like a conversation, more like a lecture. A lecture. . . ?

Harey was getting washed. I heard the splash of water in the bathroom. I looked under the bed, where I’d shoved the tape recorder a few days before. It wasn’t there.

“Harey!” I called. Her face, dripping water, appeared from behind the locker.

“You didn’t see a tape recorder under the bed by any chance, did you? A little pocket-sized one?”

“There were various things under there. I put them all over on that shelf.” She pointed to near the medicine cabinet and vanished back into the bathroom. I jumped out of bed, but I couldn’t find what I was looking for.

“You must have seen it,” I said when she came back into the main room. She combed her hair in front of the mirror and didn’t reply. It was only now I noticed she was pale, and that when her eyes met mine in the mirror there was a searching look in them.

"Harey," I began again insistently, "the tape recorder isn't on the shelf."

"You don't have anything more important to tell me?"

"I'm sorry," I murmured. "You're right, it's not that big of a deal."

That was all we needed—to start an argument!

After that we went to get breakfast. Harey was doing everything differently than usual that day, but I couldn't put my finger on what exactly had changed. She was looking closely at everything around her; a couple of times she didn't hear what I was saying to her, as if she'd suddenly gotten lost in thought. One time, when she raised her head I saw her eyes were glistening.

"What's wrong?" I asked, lowering my voice to a whisper. "Are you crying?"

"Let it be. They're not real tears," she stammered. Perhaps I shouldn't have left it at that, but there was nothing I was so afraid of as "heart-to-hearts." Besides, I had other things on my mind. Though I knew Snaut and Sartorius's scheming had only been a dream, I'd begun to wonder if there was some kind of handy weapon on the Station. I'd no idea what I would do with it; I just wanted to have it. I told Harey I needed to swing by the hold and the depositories. She followed me in silence. I searched among the crates and rifled through the capsules; then, when I went all the way down to the lowest floor, I couldn't resist the temptation to look in on the cold room. I didn't want Harey to go in there though, so I just half-opened the door and checked the whole place over with my eyes. The dark shroud bulged over the elongated figure beneath, but from where I was standing I couldn't tell if the black woman was still lying where she had been. It seemed to me that her place was empty.

I didn't find anything I could use, and I was in an ever-worsening mood as I wandered about, till all at once I realized I couldn't see Harey. She appeared right after that—she'd stayed back in the corridor—yet the very fact she'd tried to distance herself from me, something that was so hard for her even for a moment, should have made me think. But I was still acting offended at no one in particular, or just generally behaving like a jerk. I'd gotten a headache, I couldn't find any aspirin and, mad as hell, I tipped out the entire contents of the first aid kit. I couldn't be bothered to go back to the surgery; I'd rarely been such a mess as I was that day. Harey was moving about the cabin like a shadow; from time to time she'd disappear. In the afternoon, after we'd eaten lunch (though in fact she rarely ate at all, while I'd lost my appetite from the headache and didn't even press her to have something). All of a sudden she sat down next to me and began picking at the sleeve of my shirt.

“How’s it going?” I murmured absently. I had an urge to go upstairs, because I had the impression the pipes were carrying a faint echo of knocking sounds, meaning that Sartorius was tinkering with the high-tension apparatus. But I lost interest when it occurred to me that I’d have to go with Harey, whose presence might have been semi-understandable in the library, but there, among the machinery, might have led Snaut to make some inopportune remark.

“Kris,” she whispered, “how are things between us. . . ?”

I gave a sigh despite myself. I can’t say it was a happy day for me.

“Couldn’t be better. Why do you ask?”

“I wanted to have a talk with you.”

“Fire away.”

“Not that kind of talk.”

“Then what kind? Like I said, I’ve got a headache, I’ve all kind of things on my mind. . .”

“A little good will, Kris.”

I forced myself to smile. It couldn’t have been impressive.

“What is it, darling? I’m listening.”

“Will you tell me the truth?”

I raised my eyebrows. I didn’t like this as an opener.

“Why would I lie?”

“You might have your reasons. Serious ones. But if you want there to be. . . you know. . . then don’t lie to me.”

I said nothing.

“I’ll tell you something and you’ll tell me something. OK? It’ll be the truth. Regardless of anything else.”

I wasn’t looking her in the eye. She sought my gaze, but I pretended not to notice.

“I already told you that I don’t know how I got here. But maybe you know. Wait, I haven’t finished. Maybe you don’t know. But if you know and it’s just that you’re not able to tell me now, then will you later, one day? That won’t be the worst thing. In any case you’ll give me a chance.”

I had the sensation of an icy current running through my entire body.

“What are you saying, kid? What chance. . . ?” I mumbled.

“Kris, whoever I am, I’m for sure no kid. You promised. Tell me.”

That “whoever I am” gave me such a lump in my throat that all I could do was stare at her, shaking my head like an idiot, as if I were trying to prevent myself from hearing everything.

“I already said you don’t have to tell me. It’s enough for you to

say you can't."

"I'm not hiding anything. . . , " I answered hoarsely.

"Very good then," she replied, standing up. I wanted to say something. I sensed I shouldn't leave her like that, but all the words stuck in my throat.

"Harey. . ."

She was by the window, her back to me. The empty dark blue ocean lay beneath a bare sky.

"Harey, if you think that. . . Harey, you know I love you. . ."

"You love *me*?"

I went up to her. I tried to put my arms around her. She freed herself, pushing my hand aside.

"You're so good," she said. "You love me? I'd rather you beat me!"

"Harey, darling!"

"No. No. Best just don't say a thing."

She went up to the table and began clearing away the plates. I stared into the dark blue emptiness. The sun was starting to set, and the great shadow of the Station moved evenly on the waves. A plate slipped out of Harey's hands and fell on the floor. Water sounded in the sinks. At the edges of the horizon the ruddy color turned to a dirty reddish gold. If only I knew what to do. Oh, if only I knew. All at once things went quiet. Harey came and stood right by me.

"No. Don't turn around," she said, lowering her voice to a whisper. "None of this is your fault, Kris. I know it. Don't worry."

I reached out my hand towards her. She escaped to the other side of the cabin and, picking up a whole pile of plates, she said:

"Pity. If they could be broken, I'd smash them, I really would smash all of them!"

For a moment I thought she was actually going to fling them to the ground, but she threw me a keen glance and smiled.

"Don't be scared, I'm not going to make a scene."

I woke up in the middle of the night, instantly intent and watchful. I sat up in bed; the room was dark, though a faint light came from the corridor through the cracked-open door. There was a nasty hissing sound that was intensifying, and at the same time there were dull stifled thuds as if something large were thrashing about in the next room. A meteor! came a rapid thought. It's broken through the armor plating. Someone's there! There was a prolonged wheezing.

I finally regained my senses. It was the Station, not a rocket; and that awful noise. . .

I ran into the corridor. The door to the small lab was wide open and the light was on. I hurried inside.

I was struck by a wave of fearful cold. The cabin was filled with vapor that turned my breath to snow. A mass of white flakes were spinning over a body wrapped in a bathrobe that was lying on the floor and tossing weakly. I could barely see her through the icy cloud. I rushed up to her, picked her up. The robe burned my hands; she was rasping. I ran back into the corridor, past a series of doors. I no longer felt the cold, except that the breath coming out of her mouth in clouds of condensation scorched my neck like fire.

I laid her on the table, tore open the robe over her breasts. For a moment I looked at her drawn, trembling face; the blood had frozen on her open lips, covering them with a dark coating. Tiny ice crystals glittered on her tongue. . .

Liquid oxygen. There was liquid oxygen in the shop, in Dewar flasks. As I picked her up I'd felt broken glass underfoot. How much could she have swallowed? It made no difference. Her trachea was burned, and her throat and lungs; liquid oxygen is more caustic than any concentrated acid. Her breathing, raucous and dry as the sound of paper being torn, was growing shallower. Her eyes were closed. It was the death throes.

I looked at the large glass-paneled cabinets with instruments and medications. A tracheotomy? An intubation? Except she had no lungs! They were burned up. Medication? There were so many different kinds! The shelves were filled with colored bottles and packets. The wheezing sound filled the whole room; vapor was still coming from her open mouth.

Hot water bottles. . .

I started looking for them, but before I found any I darted across to the other cabinet and began rifling through boxes of ampoules. Now I found a needle, which I fumbled to put in the sterilizer, my fingers stiff with cold and clumsy. I hammered furiously on the lid of the sterilizer, but I couldn't even feel it, the only sensation was a slight tingling. She made a louder wheezing sound. I hurried over to her. Her eyes were open.

"Harey!"

It wasn't even a whisper. I couldn't speak. Her face was alien, as if made of plaster; it brought me up sharp. Her ribs were twitching under her white skin; her hair, wet from melting snow, lay scattered around her head. She was looking at me.

"Harey!"

I was unable to say any more. I stood there like a lump of wood with those unwieldy foreign hands of mine. My feet, lips, eyelids were

starting to sting ever more painfully, but I barely felt it. A droplet of blood that had melted in the heat ran down her cheek, leaving a diagonal mark. Her tongue quivered and disappeared; she was still rasping.

I took her wrist; she had no pulse. I pulled apart the lapels of the robe and placed my ear against the fearfully cold body right beneath her breast. Through a crackling roar like a fire I heard a pit-a-pat, a galloping sound too fast to count. I stood there leaning over her, my eyes closed, when something touched my head. She had dug her fingers into my hair. I looked into her eyes.

“Kris,” she croaked. I grasped her hand in mine; she squeezed it back, almost crushing it. Consciousness was ebbing from her horribly distorted face; the whites of her eyes flashed beneath her eyelids, there was a snort from her throat and her whole body was shaken by convulsions. I was barely able to hold onto her as she hung over the side of the table. She knocked her head against the side of a porcelain funnel. I pulled her up and pressed her to the table; with each new spasm she tugged away from me. I immediately became drenched in sweat, my legs felt like cotton wool. When the convulsions eased off I tried to lie her down again. She was making a squeaking sound as she gasped for air. All of a sudden, Harey’s eyes lit up in that terrible bloody face.

“Kris,” she gasped, “How much. . . how much longer, Kris?”

She began to choke; foam appeared on her lips and the convulsions began again. I held her down with all the strength I had left. She collapsed on her back so abruptly her teeth clattered; she was panting.

“No, no, no,” she exclaimed rapidly with each outbreath; each one seemed it would be the last. But the convulsions returned again and once more she writhed in my arms, in the short pauses drawing in air with such an effort her ribcage bulged. Finally her eyelids dropped half way over her open, unseeing eyes. She stopped moving. I thought it was the end. I didn’t even try to wipe the pink foam from her lips. I stood over her, leaning forward, hearing some great distant bell, and waited for her last breath so that after it I could crumple onto the floor; but she kept on breathing, only slightly wheezing, ever quieter, and the tip of her breast, which had almost stopped quivering, began to move to the quick rhythm of a working heart. I stood hunched over her, and her face began to regain color. I still didn’t understand a thing. The palms of both my hands grew moist, and I felt I was going deaf, that something soft and springy was filling my ears; I could still hear the ringing bell, which now sounded hollow, like with a broken heart.

She raised her eyelids and our eyes met.

"Harey," I tried to say, but I seemed to have no mouth. My face was a heavy lifeless mask, and all I could do was look.

Her eyes ran around the room. Her head moved. Everything was completely quiet. Behind me, in another, far-off world, water was dripping regularly from a tap that hadn't been properly turned off. She rose on one elbow. She sat up. I drew back. She was watching me.

"So. . . ," she said. "So. . . ? It didn't. . . work? Why not. . . ? Why are you looking at me like that. . . ?"

And suddenly, with a terrible scream:

"Why are you looking at me like that!!"

Silence fell. She looked at her hands. Wiggled her fingers.

"Is this me. . . ?" she asked.

"Harey," I said without breath, merely moving my lips. She raised her head.

"Harey. . . ?" she repeated. She slid down slowly onto the floor and stood up. She staggered, regained her balance, took a few steps. All this she did in a kind of daze, looking at me but seemingly without seeing me.

"Harey," she repeated slowly one more time. "But . . . I . . . I'm not Harey. And who... am I? Harey? And you, you?!"

Suddenly her eyes opened wide, flashed, and the shadow of a smile, of utter astonishment, lit up her face.

"Maybe you too? Kris! Maybe you too?!"

I said nothing, leaning back against a locker, where fear had driven me.

She dropped her arms.

"No," she said. "No, because you're afraid. Listen to me, though, I can't do it. This isn't right. I didn't know anything about it. I still don't get it even now. I mean, surely it's not possible?" She clenched her fists so tight they turned white, and pressed them to her chest. "I don't know anything except, except Harey! Do you think I'm pretending maybe? I'm not pretending, cross my heart, I'm not."

Her last words turned into a groan. She slumped to the floor, sobbing. What she had shouted had shattered something inside of me; in one long stride I reached her and seized her in my arms. She fought back, pushing me away, sobbing without tears, exclaiming:

"Let me go! Let me go! I disgust you! I know! I don't want things this way! I don't! You see it, you know you do, that it's not me, not me, not me."

"Quiet!" I cried, shaking her; we were both screaming, on our

knees facing one another. Harey's head was thrashing, knocking against my shoulder; I pulled her to myself with all my strength. All of a sudden we were still, breathing heavily. Water was dripping evenly from the faucet.

"Kris," she mumbled, pressing her face into my arm. "Tell me what I need to do so I won't be there anymore. Kris. . ."

"Stop it!" I yelled. She raised her face. Stared at me.

"What do you mean. . . ? You don't know either? There's nothing can be done? Nothing?"

"Harey. . . . for pity's sake. . ."

"I wanted to. . . you saw. No. No. Let me go, I don't want you to touch me! I disgust you."

"That's not true!"

"You're lying. I must disgust you. I. . . I disgust myself. . . as well. If I could. If I only could. . ."

"You'd kill yourself."

"Yes."

"But I don't want that, you understand? I don't want you to kill yourself. I want you to be here, with me, I don't need anything else!"

Her huge gray eyes devoured me.

"If you're lying. . . , " she said ever so softly.

I let go of her and stood up. She sat back on the floor.

"Tell me what I need to do to make you believe I'm saying what I think. That it's the truth. That there's no other."

"You can't say the truth. I'm not Harey."

"Then who are you?"

She was silent for a long while. Her chin twitched over and over, till she lowered her head and whispered:

"Harey. . . but. . . but I know that isn't true. It's not me. . . that you loved back then, long ago. . ."

"Yes," I said. "What was then is dead and gone. But you, here, I love. You understand?"

She shook her head.

"You're good. Don't think I don't appreciate all that you've done. You did the best you could. But it can't be helped. When I sat by your bed in the early morning three days ago, waiting for you to wake up, I didn't know a thing. That seems such a very long time ago. I was acting like I wasn't all there. It was like my head was filled with fog. I didn't remember what had come earlier and what had come later, and nothing surprised me, it was like coming round after anesthetic, or recovering from a long illness. I even thought maybe I'd been sick,

and it was just that you wouldn't tell me. Then later, more and more things made me wonder. You know which things. I already had an inkling after the conversation you had in the library with that, what's his name, Snaut. And since you wouldn't say anything, I got up in the night and played the tape recorder. I only lied that one time, because I hid it afterwards, Kris. What was the name of the man who was talking on it?"

"Gibarian."

"Right, Gibarian. At that moment I understood everything, though truth be told I still didn't understand anything. There was one thing I didn't know: that I couldn't. . . that I wasn't. . . that it would end. . . without an end. He didn't say anything about that. Though maybe he did, but you woke up and I turned off the tape. Even so, I heard enough to find out that I'm not a person but an instrument."

"What are you talking about?"

"That's right. To test your reactions or something like that. Each of you has something like me. It's based on memories or on the imagination; it's suppressed. Something along those lines. Besides, you know all this better than I do. He said such terrible, inconceivable things, if it hadn't all added up I don't think I would have believed him!"

"What added up?"

"You know, that I don't need sleep and I always have to be by you. Yesterday morning I still thought you hated me, and that made me sad. Good Lord, how stupid I was. But tell me, tell me yourself, could I have imagined this? I mean, he didn't hate that woman of his at all, but the things he said about her! It was only then I understood that whatever I might do it made no difference, because whether I want it or not, it must be torture for you. Or actually even worse, because a torture implement is as lifeless and innocent as a rock that can fall and kill you. But an implement that could have good intentions and could love—this I couldn't imagine. I'd like to tell you at least what went on inside me then, later, when I understood, when I listened to the tape. It might at least come in useful for you. I even tried to write it down. . ."

"Is that why you turned on the light?" I asked; I suddenly felt choked, I had difficulty speaking.

"Yes. But nothing came of it. Because I was searching inside myself, you know . . . for *them*—for that something else, I was completely mad, I can tell you! For a while I had the feeling that I didn't have a body under my skin, that inside me there was something else, that I was only a surface. There to fool you. You follow?"

"I do."

"When you lie for hours through the night like that, in your thoughts you can go very far, and in very strange directions, you know. . ."

"I know."

"But I could feel my heart, and besides, I remembered that you'd tested my blood. What's my blood like, tell me, tell me the truth. Surely you can now."

"It's the same as mine."

"Really?"

"I swear."

"What does that mean? You know, later it occurred to me that maybe *it* is hidden inside me, that it's. . . I mean, it could be very small. But I didn't know where. Now I think that at bottom I was dodging the issue, because I was terrified of what I planned to do, and I was looking for another way out. But Kris, if I have the same blood. . . if it's the way you say, then. . . No, that's not possible. I mean, I'd be dead already, wouldn't I? That means there is something after all, but where is it? Maybe in my head? Yet my thoughts are completely ordinary. . . and I don't know anything. . . If I were thinking through *it*, I ought to know everything right away, and not love you, just pretend, and know that I'm pretending. . . Kris, please, tell me all you know, maybe something can be done after all?"

"What could be done?"

She was silent.

"Do you want to die?"

"I think so."

Once again there was silence. I stood above her as she sat there hunched over. I stared at the empty interior of the room, the white enameled surfaces of the apparatus, at the shining scattered implements, as if I were searching for something terribly necessary and I couldn't find it.

"Harey, can I say something too?"

She waited.

"It's true that you're not entirely like me. But that doesn't mean you're worse. Quite the opposite. Well, you can think any way you like about it, but it's thanks to that. . . that you survived."

A kind of pathetic childlike smile appeared on her face.

"Is that supposed to mean I'm. . . immortal?"

"I don't know. In any case you're a lot less mortal than me."

"How awful," she whispered.

"Maybe not as much as you think."

"But you don't envy me. . ."

"Harey, it's more a question of your. . . purpose, as I might call it. You know, here on the Station your purpose is essentially as mysterious as mine, as that of any of us. The other men are going to continue Gibarian's experiment and anything could happen. . ."

"Or nothing."

"Or nothing, and to be honest I'd rather it was nothing, not even because I'm afraid (though I guess that plays a part, I'm not sure), but because it won't do any good. That's the one thing I'm certain of."

"It won't do any good ? Why not? Is it about the. . . the ocean?"

She shuddered.

"That's right. It's about contact. In my view, the whole thing is in essence extremely simple. Contact means an exchange of experiences, concepts, or at least results, conditions. But what if there's nothing to exchange? If an elephant isn't a very large bacterium, then an ocean can't be a very large brain. Of course, various actions can be performed by both sides. As a result of one of them I'm looking at you right now and trying to explain to you that you're more precious to me than the twelve years of my life I devoted to Solaris, and that I want to go on being with you. Perhaps your appearance was meant to be torture, perhaps a reward, or perhaps just a test under a microscope. An expression of friendship, a treacherous blow, perhaps a taunt? Perhaps everything at once or—as seems most likely to me—something entirely different. But what can you and I really care about the intentions of our parents, however different they were from one another? You can say that our future depends on those intentions, and I'd agree with you. I can't predict what's to come. Nor can you. I can't even assure you I'll always love you. If so much has already happened, then anything can happen. Maybe tomorrow I'll turn into a green jellyfish? It doesn't depend on me. But in what does depend on us, we'll be together. Is that not something?"

"Listen," she said, "there's one other thing. Am I. . . really like. . . her?"

"You were," I said, "but now I don't know any more."

"What do you mean. . . ?"

She got to her feet and looked at me with eyes wide open.

"You've already taken her place."

"And you're sure it's not her but me that you. . . Me?"

"Yes. You. I don't know. I'm afraid that if you were really her, I'd not be able to love you."

"Why not?"

"Because I did something terrible."

“To her?”

“Yes. When we were—”

“Don’t say.”

“Why not?”

“Because I want you to know that I’m not her.”

The next day, when I came back from lunch I found a note from Snaut on the table by the window. He reported that for the moment Sartorius was holding off with work on the annihilator so as to make one last attempt at irradiating the ocean with a bundle of hard rays.

"Darling," I said, "I have to go see Snaut."

The red dawn was blazing in the window panes and dividing the room in two. We were in the pale blue shadow. Beyond its border everything looked like it was made of copper; you might have thought each book would clang if it fell from the shelf.

"It's about the experiment. But I'm not sure how to go about it. You understand, I'd rather. . ."

"There's no need to explain yourself, Kris. I so wish I could. . . Maybe if it didn't last long?"

"It'll have to take a little while," I said. "Listen, how about you go with me and wait in the corridor?"

"All right. But if it's too much for me?"

"What's it actually like?" I said, adding quickly: "I'm not asking out of curiosity, you understand; but maybe if you figured it out you could overcome it yourself."

"It's fear," she said. She turned a little pale. "I can't even say what it is I'm afraid of, because really I'm not afraid, I just lose myself. At the last moment I also feel this, this shame, I can't explain. Then nothing more. That's why I thought it was some kind of illness. . ." she finished more quietly, and shuddered.

"Perhaps it's only that way on this damn Station," I said. "As for me, I'm going to do everything I can for us to leave here as soon as we can."

"Do you think that's possible?" she said, opening her eyes wide.

"Why not? I mean, I'm not shackled to the place. . . Though it'll also depend on what I decide with Snaut. What do you think? Will you be able to be alone for long?"

"It depends. . .," she said slowly. She lowered her head. "So long as I can hear your voice I should be fine."

"I'd rather you didn't hear what we're saying. Not that I have anything to hide from you, but I don't know, I can't know, what Snaut will say."

"Say no more. I understand. All right. I'll put myself somewhere where I can only hear the sound of your voice. That'll do."

"Then I'll call him right away from the lab. I'll leave the door

open.” She nodded. I walked through the wall of red rays and out into the corridor which, from the contrast, seemed almost pitch black despite the artificial lighting. The door of the small laboratory was wide open. The reflective shards of the Dewar flask lying on the floor by the row of large liquid oxygen cylinders were the last signs of the nighttime events. The small screen lit up when I took the receiver and called the radio station. The blueish membrane of light that seemed to coat the lusterless glass from within suddenly broke, and Snaut was leaning over the arm of a tall chair and looking straight into my eyes.

“Hello there,” he said.

“I read your note. I’d like to talk. Can I come over?”

“Sure. Right now?”

“Yes.”

“Fine. Will you. . . have company?”

“No.”

His gaunt, sunburned face with thick wrinkles on the forehead, tilting in the convex glass screen like some bizarre fish peering from its aquarium, assumed an ambiguous expression.

“Well, well,” he said. “I’ll be expecting you.”

“We can go, darling,” I began with a not entirely natural animation as I entered the cabin through swathes of red light beyond which I could only make out Harey’s looming silhouette. My voice failed me; she was sitting clinging to the chair, her elbows locked under the armrests. Whether she hadn’t heard my footsteps in time, or hadn’t been able to release her terrified grip quickly enough to take on a normal pose—whatever the reason, suffice it to say that I saw her for a moment grappling with the incomprehensible power that lay concealed within her, and my heart was overcome with a blind fury mingled with pity. We walked in silence down the long corridor, passing its various sections that were painted in different-colored enamel, something the architects had intended to lend variety to life inside the armored shell. From far off I saw the open door of the radio station. It let out a long band of red light into the corridor, since the sun reached there as well. I glanced at Harey, who didn’t even try to smile; I could see how the whole way there she was intently preparing for the struggle with herself. The approaching effort has already changed her face, which was pale and seemed to have grown smaller. Ten or fifteen steps from the door she came to a halt. I turned towards her; with her fingertips she gave me a gentle push to tell me to keep walking. All at once my plans, Snaut, the experiment, the whole Station, it all seemed nothing to me compared to the torment she was now facing. I felt like a torturer, and I was about to turn back when a human shadow appeared in the broad strip of sunlight bending against

the wall. I quickened my pace and entered the cabin. Snaut was just across the threshold, as if he'd been coming to meet me. The red sun was directly behind him and a crimson glare seemed to radiate from his gray hair. We looked at each other for a good while without saying anything. He seemed to be studying my face. I was blinded by the light from the window and couldn't see his expression. I walked past him and stood by the high console bristling with the curving stems of microphones. He turned slowly around on the spot, following me calmly with that slight twist of the mouth of his that, almost without changing at all, became now a smile, now a grimace of exhaustion. Without taking his eyes off me, he went up to the metal cabinet that occupied the entire wall, in front of which on either side were heaps of spare radio parts, thermic batteries and tools that seemed to have been piled there hurriedly and chaotically. He pulled up a chair and sat down, leaning his head against the enameled door of the cabinet.

The silence we'd kept up till now was becoming strange to say the least. I listened intently to it, concentrating on the quiet that filled the corridor where Harey was waiting, from where there came not the slightest murmur.

"When will the two of you be ready?" I asked.

"We could even start today, but the recording'll take some time."

"Recording? You mean the encephalogram?"

"Right. I mean, you agreed. Is there a problem?" His voice trailed off.

"No, not at all."

"Go on," Snaut said when the silence again began to gather between us.

"She already knows. . . about herself." I had dropped my voice almost to a whisper. He raised his eyebrows.

"Is that so?"

I had the impression he wasn't really surprised. Then why was he pretending? All at once I no longer felt like talking, but I forced myself. Let it be loyalty, I thought to myself, if nothing more.

"It seems she got an inkling after our conversation in the library. She observed me, put two and two together, then she found Gibarian's tape recorder and listened to the tape. . ."

He didn't change position, leaning the whole time against the cabinet, but a tiny glint appeared in his eye. From where I stood at the console I had a clear view of the open door to the corridor. I lowered my voice even more:

"Last night, while I was asleep she tried to kill herself. Liquid oxygen. . ."

There was a sudden rustling sound like a draft of air blowing through loose sheets of paper. I froze and listened hard for what was happening in the corridor, but the source of the noise was closer. It scratched like a mouse. . . A mouse? How ridiculous! There were no mice here. I watched Snaut from the corner of my eye.

“Go on,” he said calmly.

“It goes without saying she didn’t succeed. . . In any case she knows who she is.”

“Why are you telling me this?” he suddenly asked. To begin with I didn’t know what to say.

“I want you to be informed. . . I want you to know how things are,” I mumbled.

“I warned you.”

“You mean to say that you knew,” I said, raising my voice despite myself.

“No. Of course not. But I told you how it is. Every ‘guest’ is almost a ghost when they arrive; aside from a hodgepodge of memories and images taken from their. . . Adam. . . they’re basically empty. The longer they’re with you here, the more human they become. And the more independent, within certain limits of course. That’s why the longer it goes on, the harder it is—”

He broke off. He looked askance at me and asked casually:

“She knows everything?”

“Yes, I already told you.”

“Everything? Including that she was already here once before and that you—”

“No!”

He smiled.

“Kelvin, listen, if things have gone that far. . . then what do you actually mean to do? Leave the Station?”

“Yes.”

“With her?”

“Yes.”

He was silent, as if weighing up his reply, but there was something more in his silence. . . What was it? Once again that imperceptible breeze rustled, as if right behind a thin wall. He shifted in his chair.

“Very good,” he said. “Why are you staring at me like that? Did you think I’d stand in your way? You can do whatever you want, my dear fellow. We’d be in fine shape if, on top of everything else, we started using force here! I’ve no intention of trying to dissuade you. I’ll

only say one thing: in an inhuman situation you're trying to behave like a human being. That may be admirable, but it's also futile. Though in fact I'm not even sure it's admirable—I'm not sure something foolish can also be admired. But that's beside the point. You're backing out of any further experiments, you want to go, and take her with you. Is that it?"

"Yes."

"But that's also. . . an experiment. Don't you think?"

"How do you mean? Whether she'll. . . be able to? If she's with me, I don't see why not. . ."

I was speaking ever more slowly, till I broke off. Snaut gave a soft sigh.

"We're all sticking our heads in the sand here, Kelvin, but at least we're aware of it and we're not trying to act noble."

"I'm not acting anything."

"All right, I didn't mean to insult you. I take back what I said about being noble, but the thing about hiding our heads in the sand is still true. You're doing it in an especially dangerous way. You're deceiving yourself and her, and yourself again. Do you know the stabilization conditions for systems built of neutrino matter?"

"No. And neither do you. No one does."

"Of course. But we do know one thing, that such a system is unstable and can only exist if it has a constant supply of energy. I know that from Sartorius. The energy creates a warped stabilizing field. The question is, is that field external or is its source located inside the guest's body? You get the difference?"

"Yes," I said slowly. "If it's external, then she. . . then such a. . ."

"Then when the system becomes separated from Solaris it will fall apart," he finished for me. "We can't predict it, though you already conducted an experiment. The rocket you sent up. . . it's still orbiting, you know. In a spare moment I even calculated its path. You could fly up into orbit and check what happened with the. . . passenger. . ."

"Are you mad!" I hissed.

"You think so? Well. . . what if. . . we brought it back down here, the rocket? That can be done. It's controlled remotely. We'll guide it out of its orbit and. . ."

"Enough!"

"Not that either? Then there's one other way, a very simple one. It wouldn't have to land at the Station. It could stay in orbit. We could simply make radio contact. . . if she's alive she'll say something and. . ."

"The oxygen will've run out there long ago!" I stammered.

"Maybe she doesn't need oxygen. Shall we try?"

"Snaut. . . Snaut. . ."

"Kelvin. . . Kelvin. . ." he mimicked, angry. "Think about what kind of person you are. Who are you trying to make happy here? Or save? Yourself? Her? Which one? This one or the other one? Do you lack the courage to save both of them? You see yourself where this leads! I'm telling you for the last time: this, here, this is a situation beyond morality."

All at once I heard the same scratching sound as before, as if someone were scraping their fingernails down the wall. I don't know why I was overcome by a kind of passive, miry calm. It was as if I were looking at the whole situation, the two of us, everything, from a great distance, through the wrong end of a telescope. It was all tiny, rather funny, of little consequence.

"All right then," I said. "So according to you what should I do? Get rid of her? Then tomorrow another one just like her will appear, right? And again? And like that day after day? For how long? What for? What will that give me? Or you? Or Sartorius? Or the Station?"

"No, you answer me first. You'll take off with her and, let's say, you'll witness the following transformation. In a few minutes you'll see before you—"

"What?" I said sneeringly. "A monster? A demon? Hm?"

"No. Ordinary, the most ordinary, death throes. Have you already come to believe they're immortal? Let me assure you, they die. . . What will you do then? Will you come back for. . . a copy?"

"Stop it!!" I roared, clenching my fists. He gazed at me with an expression of indulgent mockery in his narrowed eyes.

"Oh, I'm the one who should stop? You know something, if I were you I'd give this conversation a rest. Find something else to do instead. You could go and give the ocean a good whipping, for example, to teach it a lesson. What is your problem? If you—" he made a playful gesture of farewell with his hand, at the same time raising his eyes slowly towards the ceiling as if following a receding figure—"then you'll be the bad guy? And otherwise you won't? Smile when you feel like howling, act happy and composed when you want to gnaw your knuckles—then you won't be a bad guy? What if it's impossible not to be, in this place? What then? You'll rage in front of Snaut, who's responsible for everything, huh? Then on top of everything else you're an idiot, my friend. . ."

"You're talking about yourself," I said, my head lowered. "I. . . I love her."

"Who? Your memory."

"No. Her. I told you what she tried to do. There's many a . . . real person wouldn't do that."

"You admit it yourself when you say—"

"Don't catch me in my words."

"All right. So she loves you. And you want to love her. That's not the same thing."

"You're wrong."

"Kelvin, I'm sorry, but you're the one who brought up your private affairs. You don't love her. You do love her. She's prepared to give up her life. You, too. It's all very moving, very beautiful, sublime, whatever. But there's no room for any of that here. No room. Understand? No, you don't want to understand. You refuse to understand. Forces beyond our control have involved you in a cyclical process of which she is a part. A phase. A repeating rhythm. If she were. . . if you were being pursued by something hideous that was prepared to do anything for you, you'd not hesitate to get rid of it. Right?"

"Right."

"Then, then maybe that's exactly why she *isn't* hideous! Does that tie your hands? That's what it's about, that your hands should be tied!"

"One more hypothesis to add to the million others in the library. Come off it, Snaut, she's. . . no. I don't want to talk about this with you."

"All right. You started it. But just remember she's basically a mirror reflecting part of your brain. If she's wonderful, it's because your memories are wonderful. You provided the recipe. A cyclical process, don't forget!"

"So what do you want from me? You want me. . . you want me to get rid of her? I already asked you: why should I do that? You didn't answer."

"Then I'll answer you now. I didn't ask for this conversation. I didn't go poking around in your business. I'm not ordering or forbidding you to do anything, and I wouldn't even if I could. It was you, you came here and laid everything out, and do you know why? No? So as to get it off your chest. Dump it on someone else. I know that burden, my friend! That's right, don't interrupt! I'm not standing in your way at all, but you, you *want* me to stand in your way. If I presented obstacles, maybe you'd smash my head in, but then at least you'd be dealing with me, with someone made of the same flesh and blood as yourself, and you'd feel human too. But this way. . . you can't handle it and that's why you're having this discussion with me. . . and in fact with yourself! You forgot to mention you'd double up in pain if

she were to suddenly vanish. No, don't say any more. . ."

"You've got a nerve! Out of simple loyalty I came to let you know that I intend to leave the Station with her," I said, repulsing his attack, though it sounded unconvincing even to me. Snaut shrugged.

"It's quite possible you need to stick to that story. If I said anything at all in this business, it's only because you're rising higher and higher, and a fall from high up, as I'm sure you understand. . . Come up to Sartorius's tomorrow morning around nine. . . Will you?"

"To Sartorius's?" I replied in surprise. "He doesn't let anyone in; you said he can't even be reached on the phone."

"He's gotten it together now somehow or other. We don't talk about it, you know. You're. . . that's a whole other matter. Well, never mind that. You'll come tomorrow?"

"I will," I murmured. I stared at Snaut. His left hand was hidden as if by chance behind the door of a locker. When had it opened? It must have been some time ago, except that in the heat of the conversation, which I'd found so onerous, I'd not paid any attention to it. It looked so unnatural. . . as if. . . he were hiding something there. Or as if someone had a hold of his hand. I moistened my lips.

"Snaut, what is it?"

"Go now," he said quietly and very calmly. "Go."

I went, closing the door behind me in the remains of the red glow. Harey was sitting on the floor ten yards away, right by the wall. She jumped up when she saw me.

"You see. . . ?" she said, looking at me with shining eyes. "It worked, Kris. I'm so pleased. Perhaps. . . Perhaps it'll get better and better. . ."

"I'm sure it will," I answered distractedly. We walked back to our cabin, while I puzzled over that stupid locker. So he was concealing. . . ? And that entire conversation. . . ? My cheeks started to burn so badly I rubbed them despite myself. Lord, this was madness. And what had we actually decided? Nothing? Oh right, tomorrow morning. . .

Suddenly I was overcome by fear almost as powerful as the previous night. My encephalogram. A complete recording of all my cerebral processes, converted into the oscillations of a bundle of rays, to be sent down below. Into the depths of that elusive, boundless monster. How did he put it: "If she vanished, you'd suffer terribly, right?" An encephalogram is a total recording. Including subconscious processes. What if I want her to disappear, to perish? Otherwise why would I have been so horrified when she survived that terrible attempt? Can a person be responsible for his own subconscious? If I'm not responsible for it, then who could be. . . ? What foolishness! Why the hell had I agreed the recording should be of me. . . Of course, I

could examine it beforehand, but I wouldn't be able to read it anyway. No one would. Specialists can determine only what the subject was thinking about, and even then they're just generalizations: for example, they can say he was solving math problems, but they have no idea which kind. They say it's not possible to know, because the encephalogram is a random combination of a whole mass of simultaneous processes, only some of which have a mental underpinning. And the subconscious parts. . . ? These they're unwilling to discuss at all. So they're a very long way from being able to decipher a person's memories, suppressed or otherwise. . . Then why am I so afraid? I myself had told Harey earlier that the experiment wouldn't do any good. Because if our neurophysiologists can't read a recording, then how could this utterly alien, black, liquid monster. . .

Yet it had entered into me, I have no idea how; it had sifted through my entire memory and found its most painful atom. How could that be doubted? And without any assistance, without any "radiation transmission" it had broken through the double hermetic plating, the thick armoring of the Station, had found my body inside it, and had made off with its plunder. . .

"Kris. . . ?" said Harey quietly. I was standing at the window, gazing with unseeing eyes at the beginnings of the night. The stars were veiled by a delicate film, faint at that geographic latitude—a thin, even covering of clouds that were so high the sun, from far below the horizon, pervaded them with the subtlest silvery-pink glow.

If she disappears afterwards, that will mean I wanted it. Because I killed her. Should I not go there tomorrow? They couldn't force me. But what would I tell them? Not—that. I couldn't. No, I needed to pretend, to lie, all the time, always. Though that was because there may have been thoughts in me, intentions, hopes, cruel, wonderful, murderous, yet of which I was quite unaware. Human beings set out to encounter other worlds, other civilizations, without having fully gotten to know their own hidden recesses, their blind alleys, well shafts, dark barricaded doors. To give her up to them. . . out of shame? To give her up only because I'd run out of courage?

"Kris," Harey whispered even more softly than before. I felt rather than heard her coming noiselessly up to me, and I pretended I hadn't noticed. At that moment I wanted to be alone. I had to be alone. I still hadn't found strength inside myself. I'd reached no decision, no resolution. As I stared at the darkening sky, at the stars that were only a spectral shadow of terrestrial stars, I stood there motionless; in the emptiness that was gradually taking the place of the whirlwind of thoughts from a moment before, there arose without words the dead, indifferent certainty that deep down, in a place I could not reach, I

had already chosen; and, pretending that nothing had happened, I didn't even have the strength to despise myself.

“Kris, is it because of this experiment?”

I flinched at the sound of her voice. I'd been lying sleepless for hours, staring into the darkness, alone, because I couldn't even hear her breathing, and in the tangled labyrinth of nighttime thoughts that were feverish, half logical, and thus acquired a new dimension and meaning, I'd forgotten about her.

“What. . . How did you know I wasn't asleep. . . ?” I asked. There was fear in my voice.

“From the way you're breathing,” she said quietly, as if apologetically. “I didn't mean to bother you. . . If you can't talk, don't. . .”

“No, why not. Yes, it's the experiment. You guessed.”

“What do they expect it to accomplish?”

“They don't know themselves. Something. Anything. This isn't Operation Thought, it's Operation Despair. Now they only need only one thing, someone who'll have enough courage to make a decision, but most people see that kind of courage as ordinary cowardice, because it's a retreat, you know, surrender, an escape that's unworthy of a person. As if worthiness was plodding forward and getting bogged down, and drowning in something you don't understand and never will.”

I broke off, but before my quickened breathing calmed down I gave vent to a new burst of anger:

“Of course there's never any lack of guys with a practical outlook. They said that even if contact isn't made, still, by studying the plasma and all those crazy living cities that pop out of it for a single day then disappear again, we'll learn the secrets of matter, as if they didn't know they're fooling themselves. They're wandering around in a library of books written in an unknown language, and just looking at the colors of the spines. . . That's how it is!”

“Are there no other planets like this?”

“No one knows. Perhaps there are, but we only know this one. In any case it's something extremely rare, unlike Earth. Us, we're common, we're the grass of the universe, and we take pride in our commonness, that it's so widespread, and we thought it could encompass everything. It was a kind of schema we took with us when we set off intrepidly and joyfully on our long journey: other worlds! But what exactly are they, those other worlds? We'd conquer them or we'd be conquered, there was nothing else in those wretched brains of ours. It wasn't worth it. It really wasn't.”

I got up; in the dark I found the first aid kit and a flat bottle of sleeping pills.

"I'm going to get some sleep, darling," I said, turning towards the darkness, from where there came the high-pitched hum of the air conditioning. "I need to sleep. Otherwise I really don't know. . ."

I sat back down on the bed. She touched my hand. I put my arms around her, unseen, and held her without moving until my grip was loosened by slumber.

In the morning, when I woke fresh and rested, the experiment seemed trivial to me; I couldn't understand how I could have attached so much importance to it. I didn't care either that Harey had to go to the lab with me. All her efforts became futile after I'd been gone from the room for a few minutes, so I gave up any thoughts of further attempts, even though she herself urged them (she was even prepared to be locked up somewhere); I suggested she take a book to read.

I was interested less in the procedure itself than in what I'd find in the laboratory. Aside from certain evident gaps in the bookcases and the cabinets with chemical glassware (in addition to which, panes were missing in the doors of several of the cabinets, while one of the doors itself had a star-shaped crack as if there'd been a recent struggle whose traces had been hurriedly though rather carefully covered over), there was nothing out of the ordinary in that blue and white room. Snaut, who was bustling about among the equipment, behaved entirely correctly, accepting the presence of Harey as something quite ordinary, and bowing slightly to her from a distance. As he was moistening my temples and forehead with conductive gel, Sartorius came in through a small door that led to the darkroom. He was wearing a white lab coat, over which he had a black anti-radiation apron that reached down to his ankles. Brisk and matter-of-fact, he greeted me as if we were just two employees among a hundred at some big institute on Earth and had seen each other just the previous day. It was only now I noticed that the lifeless expression of his face came from contact lenses, which he wore instead of eyeglasses.

Arms folded on his chest, he stood and watched as Snaut wrapped a bandage around the electrodes attached to my head, forming a kind of white cap. Several times he cast his eyes about the whole room, seeming not to notice Harey, who sat hunched and uncomfortable on a small stool by the wall, pretending to read her book. When Snaut stepped away from my chair I moved my head, which was weighed down with metal and wires, to watch him turn on the apparatus. But all at once Sartorius raised his hand and said unctuously:

"Doctor Kelvin! I'd like to ask for a moment of your attention! I don't wish to impose anything on you, for that would not serve our

purpose; but you need to stop thinking about yourself, about me, about our colleague Snaut, about any other persons, so that by eliminating the randomness of particular individuals, you concentrate on the matter at hand. Earth and Solaris; generations of researchers who constitute a whole, despite the fact that particular people have their beginnings and endings; our unyielding efforts at establishing intellectual contact; the historical path taken by humanity; the certainty that it will be continued into the future; the readiness to make any effort and any sacrifice, to give up all personal feelings in the interests of our mission—these are the subjects that ought to fill your consciousness completely. True, the sequence of associations does not depend entirely on your will, but the fact that you are here at all guarantees the authenticity of the continuity I speak of. If you are uncertain you have performed the task appropriately please say so, and Dr. Snaut will repeat the recording. After all, we do not lack for time. . .”

He uttered these last words with a pale dry smile that did not detract in the slightest from the expression of penetrating consternation in his eyes. I was writhing inside from this mountain of clichés pronounced with such earnestness and gravity; fortunately Snaut interrupted the lengthening silence.

“Shall we, Kris?” he asked, leaning on the high console of the electroencephalograph, in a casual, unconstrained pose, as if he were resting his elbow on an armchair. I was grateful to him for using my first name.

“Yes,” I said, half-closing my eyes. The jitters that had laid waste to my mind when he finished attaching the electrodes and placed his fingers on the switch suddenly passed; through my eyelashes I could see the pinkish glow of the control lights on the black dashboard of the machine. The cold, disagreeable chill of the metal electrodes, pressed to my head like frozen coins, also went away. I was like a dark, unlit stage. The empty space was surrounded on all sides by an invisible crowd of spectators gathered in a circle around a silence filled with an ironic contempt for Sartorius and the Mission. The tension felt by these inner observers, eager to play an improvised role, grew weaker. “Harey?”—I thought the word as a test, with a sickening unease, prepared to withdraw it immediately. But that blind, attentive audience of mine did not protest. For a certain short time I was nothing but pure tenderness, sincere regret, willing to undertake long, patient sacrifices. Harey filled me, lacking features, shape, face; and at the same time, through the impersonal idea of her, infused with desperate affection, I had a vision of Giese, the father of solaristics and of solaricists, in all the dignity of his professorial presence. But I wasn’t thinking about the muddy explosion, about the stinking void

that swallowed up his gold-rimmed spectacles and his scrupulously brushed gray mustache. I could only see the engraving on the title page of his monograph, the densely hatched background the artist had added around his head such that it appeared unsuspectingly almost in an aureola, so similar not in its features but its steadfast old-fashioned prudence to the face of my own father, and in the end I didn't know which of the two of them was looking at me. Neither of them had a grave, something that in our times was so frequent and ordinary that it stirred no particular feelings.

The image was fading already, and for a moment that lasted I don't know how long I forgot about the Station, the experiment, Harey, the black ocean, everything; I was filled with an instantaneous certainty that those two men, who were no longer with us, infinitely small and turned to dust, had been equal to anything they had encountered, and the calm that resulted from this realization annihilated the formless crowd surrounding the arena in mute expectation of my defeat. Along with a double click of the apparatus being turned off, the artificial light exploded into my eyes. I squinted. Sartorius was gazing at me inquiringly, still in the same pose; Snaut, his back to the other man, was busy with the equipment, seemingly deliberately clattering the clogs he wore loosely on his feet.

"Do you think it was successful, Dr. Kelvin?" Sartorius asked, his repulsive nasal voice breaking off.

"Yes," I said.

"Are you sure?" Sartorius responded with a hint of surprise or even suspicion.

"Yes."

The certainty and brusqueness of my reply temporarily threw him off balance with his stiff solemnity.

"Oh. . . Very well. . . ," he mumbled, and looked around as if he didn't know what to do now. Snaut came up to my chair and started unwinding the bandage.

I got up and walked around the room; in the meantime Sartorius, who had disappeared into the darkroom, came out with the film already developed and dried. The wavering lines with their whitish zigzags covered several yards of tape, like some kind of mold or cobweb extending along the shiny black ribbon of celluloid.

I no longer had anything to do, but I didn't leave. The other two men had entered the tape into the oxidized head of the modulator; Sartorius had taken a last look at the end of it, frowning mistrustfully, as if he were attempting to decipher what was contained in those shaky lines.

The rest of the experiment was not to be seen. I only knew what

was happening when they stood at the instrument consoles by the wall and turned on the appropriate apparatus. The current sprang to life with a faint bass hum in the coil casing beneath the armored floor, and then there were just the lights in the vertical glass tubes of the indicators moving downwards to show that the great tube of the X-ray cannon was dropping down the vertical shaft and coming to rest in its open mouth. At this point the lights stopped at the lowest levels of the scale and Snaut began to crank up the voltage till the indicators, or more accurately the white bars that represented them, fluttered and made a half-turn to the right. The noise of the current was barely audible. Nothing was happening; the drums containing the film revolved beneath their cover so even that was out of sight, and the footage counter ticked softly like the workings of a clock.

Harey gazed now at me, now at them, from over her book. I went up to her. She gave me a quizzical look. The experiment was ending now; Sartorius slowly approached the conical top of the machine.

“Can we go?” Harey mouthed at me. I nodded. She got up. Without saying goodbye to anyone—I would have found it too ridiculous—I walked past Sartorius.

The high windows of the upper corridor were filled with a sunset of exceptional beauty. It wasn't the usual cheerless tumescent red, but every possible shade of pink, beneath a luminous mist that seemed sprinkled with the finest silver. The leaden, irregularly undulating black of the ocean's endless plain seemed to respond to this mild aura with a spume that gave off a soft, dirty purple reflection. It was only at its very zenith that the sky was fiercely ruddy.

All at once I came to a halt in the middle of the downstairs corridor. I couldn't bear to think that once again we'd be stuck in our cabin open to the ocean, like in a prison cell.

“Harey,” I said, “you know. . . I wouldn't mind swinging by the library. Would that be OK. . . ?”

“Sure, I'd be glad to. I could look for something to read,” she said, with somewhat artificial animation.

I sensed that since the day before there was an unfilled gulf between us and that I ought to show her at least a little warmth; but I was overcome by complete apathy. I don't know what would have had to happen for me to be shaken out of it. We went back along the corridor, then down a ramp to a small vestibule. Here there were three doors, and between them flowers as if in display cabinets behind crystal glass panes.

The middle door, which led to the library, was lined on both sides with bulging artificial leather which I tried not to touch as I went in. Inside it was a little cooler in the large circular space under the pale

silver ceiling with its stylized suns.

I ran my hand across the backs of the series of solaristic classics, and I was about to take down the first volume of Giese, the one with the engraving under tissue paper on the title page, when I unexpectedly found Gravinsky's small-format book, which I'd overlooked the previous time.

I sat down on an upholstered chair. It was completely quiet. A few feet away from me Harey was flipping through some book. I could hear the faint rustle of the pages beneath her fingers. Gravinsky's compendium, which was most often used in school as a simple crib, was an alphabetically arranged collection of solaristic hypotheses, from Abiological to Zoo-degenerative. The compiler, who I don't think had ever seen *Solaris*, had plowed through every monograph, expedition logbook, fragmentary text and interim report; he'd even found quotations in the works of planetologists who studied other globes, and provided a catalogue that was somewhat terrifying in the brevity of its formulations, since some of them veered into inconsequentiality, deprived of the subtle complexity of thought that had accompanied their inception. Though in fact the whole, encyclopedic in intention, had ended up rather having curiosity value only; the book had been published twenty years before, and in the meantime a mountain of new hypotheses had appeared, by now too numerous to be contained in a single volume. I looked over the alphabetical index of authors, which was like a list of the fallen—very few of them were still alive, and I don't think a single one was still active in the field. This entire treasury of thought, branching off in every direction, left the impression that one of the hypotheses simply had to be correct, that it wasn't possible reality should be entirely other than the myriad propositions hurled at it. Gravinsky had prefaced the whole with an introduction in which he divided the preceding almost sixty years of *Solaris* studies into periods. In the first, dating from the initial exploration of the planet, no one was really consciously proposing hypotheses yet. At that time it was assumed, intuitively as it were, on the basis of "common sense," that the ocean was a lifeless chemical conglomerate, a monstrous mass of jelly covering the globe, which produced extraordinary formations as a consequence of its "quasi-volcanic" activity, and through self-generating automatic processes stabilized its irregular orbit, just as a pendulum maintains an unchanging plane once set in motion. True, only three years later Magenon declared the living nature of the "gelatinous machine," though Gravinsky dated the period of biological hypotheses as beginning only nine years afterwards, when Magenon's previously isolated notion began to gather more and more supporters. The subsequent years abounded in theoretical models of the living

ocean, all highly complex and based on biomathematical analyses. The third period involved the collapse of what had hitherto been largely monolithic opinion on the part of scholars.

A multiplicity of schools appeared, that often fought furiously with one another. It was the time when Panmaller, Strobla, Freyhous, le Greuill, and Osipovich were active; Giese's entire legacy was subject to devastating critique. It was at that time there appeared the first atlases, catalogues, stereoscopic photographs of asymmetriads, which previously had been regarded as unexaminable—the turning-point came with new remote-controlled mechanisms that were dispatched into the stormy hearts of the giants, which threatened to explode at any moment. At this point, in the margins of the raging discussions, there began to appear isolated, scornfully ignored minimalistic hypotheses suggesting that even if the much-trumpeted "contact" with a "rational monster" were not made, an examination of the hardening mimoid cities and balloon-like mountains thrown up and subsequently swallowed by the ocean was still likely to produce valuable chemical and physio-chemical knowledge and insights into the structure of giant molecules; but no one even engaged the proponents of such ideas in debate. After all, it was a period that saw the appearance of still current catalogues of typical metamorphoses, or Franck's bioplasmic theory of mimoids, which, though it was abandoned as false, remained a magnificent example of intellectual panache and logical construction.

These "Gravinsky periods," which lasted over thirty years in all, were the naive youth, the impulsively optimistic romanticism, and finally the maturity of solaristics, marked by the first skeptical voices. By the end of the first twenty-five years there were already heard—as a return to the first colloidal-mechanistic theories—hypotheses that were their late offspring, concerning the non-mental state of Solaris' ocean. The entire search for signs of a conscious will, for a teleology of processes, for activity motivated by the ocean's inner needs, was almost universally acknowledged to have been an aberration on the part of a whole generation of researchers. A journalistic passion for refuting their assertions prepared the ground for the sober, analytically oriented work, concentrating on the assiduous gathering of facts, that was conducted by the group of Holden, Eonides, and Stoliwa; it was a time of the rapid increase in number and size of archives and microfilm collections, of expeditions lavishly equipped with every possible device Earth had to offer: automatic recording equipment, sensors, probes, you name it. In some years more than a thousand people took part in the research at the same time; but while the speed at which new material was amassed continued to grow, the spirit that moved the scientists was waning, and there began a period

of decline, hard to pinpoint in time, for that still optimistic phase in the exploration of Solaris.

It was characterized above all by the great and courageous personalities—sometimes in theoretical imagination, sometimes in negation—of people such as Giese, Strobla, or Sevada; the last of these, who was also the last of the great solaricists, perished in mysterious circumstances in the vicinity of the planet's south pole, having done something that even first-timers never would. Before the eyes of a hundred observers he flew his machine, which had been gliding low over the ocean, into the heart of a rapido which was clearly moving out of his way. There was talk of some kind of sudden incapacity, a loss of consciousness, or a rudder defect; in reality, I believe it was the first suicide—the first abrupt, overt explosion of despair.

But not the last. Gravinsky's volume, however, did not include such information; I added dates, facts, and details from myself as I studied the yellowed pages and tiny print of his book.

In fact, those sorry attempts on one's own life also came to a stop; nor were there any more of the great characters. The recruitment of scientists who are to devote themselves to a particular branch of planetology is itself an unstudied phenomenon. People of outstanding abilities and strength of character are born at more or less regular intervals, so it's only the matter of their selection that is uneven. Their presence or absence in a particular field of inquiry can perhaps be explained by the perspectives it opens up. Whatever one thinks about the classic scholars of solaristics, no one can deny them greatness, often genius. The best mathematicians and physicists, the leading figures in biophysics, information theory, and electrophysiology, for decades were drawn to the silent giant of Solaris. All at once, from one year to the next the army of researchers was, as it were, deprived of its generals. There remained a gray, nameless mass of patient fact-gatherers, compilers, creators of experiments that were occasionally designed with originality; but there were no more mass expeditions on a global scale, or bold unifying theories.

Solaristics seemed to be falling apart, and as a kind of accompaniment or parallel to its descent there was a flurry of hypotheses, barely distinguishable from one another by second-order details, revolving around the degeneration, retardation, involution of the seas of Solaris. From time to time more daring and intriguing conceptualizations emerged, but they all seemed to pass judgment on the ocean, which came to be seen as the final stage of a development which long ago, thousands of years back, had had its period of supreme organization and now, having survived only physically, was disintegrating into a multitude of unnecessary, nonsensical agonal

formations. So these were monumental, centuries-long death throes—that was how Solaris was perceived. Its extensors and mimoids were seen as tumorous growths; the processes that moved its huge fluid body were examined for indications of chaos and anarchy, to the point that this orientation became an obsession, and the entire scientific literature of the following seven or eight years, though of course free of expressions explicitly indicating the feelings of its authors, nevertheless was like one long barrage of insults—revenge taken by the gray leaderless masses of solaricists upon the unchangingly indifferent object of their intensified research, which continued to pay no attention to them whatsoever.

I was familiar with the work of a number of European psychologists wrongly, I think, excluded from this collection of classic Solariana, whose only connection with the field was that for a lengthy period they researched public opinion, collecting the most ordinary views, the attitudes of non-specialists, and in this way demonstrated the astonishingly close relationship between changes in such views and processes simultaneously taking place among the ranks of scholars.

Changes also occurred within the coordinating group of the Planetology Institute, where decisions were made concerning the material support provided for research. These changes resulted in a gradual but prolonged reduction in the budget of solaristic institutes and centers, and in grants for teams traveling to the planet.

Voices arguing for cutbacks in research mingled with speeches demanding more vigorous means; though no one may have gone further than the administrative director of the Worldwide Cosmology Institute, who stubbornly maintained that the living ocean wasn't ignoring human beings, but rather it simply didn't notice them, just as an elephant fails to see the ants crawling across its back; in order to call its attention to ourselves, then, what was needed were powerful stimuli and gigantic machines operating at the level of the entire planet. One amusing detail was the fact that, as the press mischievously pointed out, such costly measures were being demanded by the director of the Cosmology Institute, not the Institute of Planetology, which financed the exploration of Solaris; this, then, was generosity with someone else's money.

Subsequently, the confusion of hypotheses, the reviving of old ones, the introduction of trivial changes rendering them more precise or, on the contrary, more ambiguous—all this began to turn the field of solaristics, which despite its breadth had been rather straightforward up to this point, into an ever more entangled labyrinth full of blind alleys. In an atmosphere of general indifference, stagnation, and discouragement, a second ocean of futile print seemed

in time to be accompanying the ocean of Solaris.

About two years before I joined Gibarian's workshop as a graduate of the Institute, the Mett-Irving Foundation was founded. It offered large prizes to anyone who found a way to utilize the energy of the oceanic plasma to the benefit of human beings. This had already been a temptation earlier, and spaceships had brought numerous consignments of plasma to Earth. Long and patient work had been carried out to find methods to conserve it, applying both high and low temperatures, an artificial micro-atmosphere and micro-climate resembling that of Solaris, preservative radiation, and a thousand chemical recipes, all of which merely allowed us to observe a more or less sluggish process of decay which, it goes without saying, like everything else was described multiple times in extreme detail in all its stages—autolysis, maceration, primary or early liquefaction, secondary or late liquefaction. A similar fate befell samples taken from the various productions and formations of the plasma. They differed from one another only in the path they took to the end, which constituted a watery fluid attenuated by auto-fermentation, light as ash and gleaming like metal. Its composition, proportion of elements, and chemical formulas could be given by any solaricist at the drop of a hat.

The absolute failure to keep any large or small portion of the monster alive, or at least in a state of suspended vegetation or hibernation, away from its planetary organism, became the source of a belief (developed by the school of Meunier and Prorokh) that there was in fact only one single mystery to solve, and that once we opened it with the right interpretive key, everything would immediately be clear. . .

In the search for this key, this philosopher's stone of Solaris, time and energy were expended by people who often had nothing to do with science, and in solaristics' fourth decade the numbers of maniacal impostors from outside the scientific community, zealots whose fanaticism exceeded that of their distant predecessors, like the prophets of the "perpetuum mobile" or the "squaring of the circle"—their numbers, then, assumed the dimensions of an epidemic, actually alarming many psychologists. After a few years, however, this passion died down, and when I was preparing for my voyage to Solaris, both it and the ocean that had inspired it had long disappeared from newspaper headlines and from daily conversation.

As I replaced Gravinsky's volume on the shelf, next to it—since the books were arranged alphabetically—I noticed, barely visible between the thick tomes, a small pamphlet by Grattenstrom, one of the most curious blooms of the solaristic literature. It was a work that, in the struggle to understand the Non-Human, was directed against

humans themselves, against people, a kind of lampoon of our species, furious in its mathematical coldness. It was written by a self-taught scholar who had first published a series of outstanding contributions to certain highly specific and rather marginal branches of quantum physics. In his most important and most extraordinary work, a mere dozen or so pages long, he sought to demonstrate that even the most seemingly abstract, sublimely theoretical, mathematicized achievements of science have in reality moved only a step or two away from a prehistoric, coarsely sensory-based, anthropomorphic understanding of the world around us. Grattenstrom examined the formulas of relativity theory and of the theorem of force fields; he looked at parastatics and the hypotheses of a unified cosmic field, in search of traces of the human body -- all that comes from and is a consequence of the existence of our senses, the structure of our organism, and the limitations and weaknesses of humankind's animal physiology. He reached the conclusion that there cannot now, nor in the future could there ever be, talk of "contact" between human beings and any non-humanoid civilization. In this satire against the entire species the thinking ocean is not mentioned once, but its presence, in the shape of a contemptuously triumphal silence, could be sensed underlying virtually every sentence. That was at any rate the impression I had had when I read Grattenstrom's pamphlet for the first time. This work was actually more of a curio than a work of solaristics in the strict sense of the term; it was included in the library of classics of the genre because it had been placed there by Gibarian himself—who, as it happened, had been the one who gave it me to read.

With a strange feeling akin to respect I slipped the slim unbound offprint back among the books on the shelf. I ran my fingertips over the green and brown *Almanac of Solaristics*. Amid all the chaos and helplessness we were embroiled in, it couldn't be denied that the experiences of the last few weeks had given us some certainty on a couple of fundamental questions over which a sea of ink had been spilled in recent years—debates that previously had been futile because they were unresolvable.

Someone fond of paradoxes and sufficiently stubborn could go on doubting that the ocean was a living being. But it was impossible to deny the existence of its mind, whatever could be understood by the term. It had become quite clear that it was only too aware of our presence above it. . . . That statement alone disconfirmed the entire expansive wing of solaristics that declared the ocean to be "a world unto itself," "a being unto itself," deprived by a process of repeated atrophy of its former sensory organs, such that it supposedly knew nothing of the existence of external phenomena or objects, enclosed in

a vortex of gigantic currents of thought whose abode, cradle, and creator were the depths spinning beneath their two suns.

And more: we had learned it could synthesize artificially that which we ourselves could not—our bodies—and even improve them by introducing into their subatomic structure inconceivable changes which probably had something to do with the purposes that drove it.

It existed then, it lived, thought, acted; the possibility of reducing the “Solaris problem” to nonsense or to zero, the belief that we were not dealing with any Being, and by the same token that our loss was not in fact any kind of loss—all this was gone for good. Whether they liked it or not, human beings had to take cognizance of a neighbor that, though it was billions of miles away across the void and separated from us by entire light years, still lay in the path of their expansion, and was harder to grasp than the whole of the rest of the Universe.

We may be at the turning point of all history, I thought to myself. A decision to give up, turn back, either now or in the near future, could prevail; I no longer regarded even the closing down of the Station as improbable, or at least beyond the bounds of possibility. But I didn’t believe that anything could be saved in this way. The very existence of the thinking colossus would never let people abide in peace again. However much they traveled across the Galaxy and made contact with civilizations of other beings similar to us, Solaris would present a perpetual challenge to humankind.

One other small leather-bound volume had found its way among the yearbooks of the *Almanac*. I gazed for a moment at the cover, darkened from the touch of fingers, before I opened it. It was an old book, the *Introduction to Solaristics* by Muntius. I was remembering the night I spent poring over it, and Gibarian’s smile when he gave me his copy, and the terrestrial dawn in the window as I reached the words “The End.” Solaristics, wrote Muntius, is a substitute for religion in the space age. It is faith wrapped in the cloak of science; contact, the goal for which we are striving, is as vague and obscure as communion with the saints or the coming of the Messiah. Exploration is a liturgy couched in methodological formulas; the humble work of researchers is the expectation of consummation, of Annunciation, for there are not nor can there be any bridges between Solaris and Earth. This obvious fact, like many others—the absence of shared experiences, the absence of conveyable concepts—was rejected by solaricists, the same way the faithful reject arguments that would subvert the underpinnings of their faith. Besides, what do people expect, what can they want from “informational communication” with thinking seas? A recording of experiences of a being that endures through time, and is so old it probably cannot remember its own beginning? A description of the

desires, passions, hopes and sufferings, that are released in the instantaneous birth of living mountains, the transformation of mathematics into existence, of loneliness and resignation into plenitude? Yet all this constitutes uncommunicable knowledge, and if one attempts to translate it into any terrestrial language, all those sought-after values and significations are lost, they remain on the far side. Besides, it isn't these sorts of revelations, more worthy of poetry than science, that are hoped for by the "believers," oh no; though they themselves are unaware of it, what they are waiting for is a Revelation that would explain to them the meaning of humankind itself! Solaristics, then, is the posthumous child of long-dead myths, the final flower of mystical yearnings that people no longer have the courage to utter aloud; while the cornerstone hidden deep in the foundations of this edifice is the hope of Redemption. . .

But, incapable of admitting that this is truly the case, solaricists scrupulously avoid all commentary on Contact, such that in their writings it becomes something ultimate—and while in its initial, still sober sense it was supposed to be a beginning, an introduction, an entry point onto a new path, one of many, it became beatified, and after the passage of years it turned into their eternity and their heaven. . .

Straightforward and bitter is the analysis offered by Muntius, that "heretic" of planetology; dazzling in its negation, in shattering the myth of Solaris, or rather of the Human Mission. That first voice, which dared to speak out as solaristics was still a developing field imbued with confidence and romanticism, was greeted with complete disregard and silence—something only too understandable, since accepting Muntius's words would have been tantamount to erasing solaristics completely as it had existed thus far. The beginnings of a different, dispassionate, modest solaristics waited in vain for a founder. Five years after Muntius died, by which time his book had become a bibliographic rarity, a collector's item not to be found either in any solaristic series or in philosophy libraries, a school named after him arose—a Norwegian circle in which the composure of his exposition, divided among the different characters of the thinkers assuming his legacy, turned into the caustic, pigheaded sarcasm of Erle Ennesson, and in a somewhat trivialized version, the "utilitarian" solaristics of Phaelanga; the latter called for a focus on the concrete benefits to be gained from research, without becoming distracted by the daydreams and false hopes of civilizational contact and intellectual communion between two civilizations. Yet next to Muntius's pitiless analysis, the writings of all his intellectual disciples are little more than footnotery, if not garden variety popularization, with the exception of the works of Ennesson and possibly Takata.

Muntius himself had essentially accomplished everything, labeling the first phase of solaristics the “period of the prophets,” among whom he included Giese, Holden, and Sevada; the second phase he called “the great schism”—the splitting of the one solarian Church into a clutch of warring denominations; and he predicted a third phase—one of dogmatism and scholastic fossilization which would set in when everything there was to research had already been researched. This, however, did not happen. I believe Gibarian was correct after all in seeing Muntius’s scorched-earth exposition as a massive oversimplification that disregarded anything in solaristics that ran contrary to the elements of faith; for in reality what predominated in the field was unceasingly mundane research that promised nothing beyond a material globe orbiting around two suns.

Inside Muntius’s book there was a faded offprint from the journal *Parerga Solariana*, folded in two. It was one of the first papers Gibarian had written, before he became director of the Institute. After the title —“Why I Am a Solaricist”—there followed a list, concise as a precis almost, of the specific phenomena that justified the real possibility of Contact. For Gibarian belonged to what may well have been the last generation of researchers who had the courage to refer back to the glory days of optimism and were not averse to their own kind of faith, which went beyond the boundaries laid down by science, yet was eminently material, since it believed their efforts would succeed so long as those efforts were sufficiently persistent and unceasing.

He was trained in the well-known, classic bioelectronic line of research of the Eurasian school, which included Cho-En-Min, Ngyalla, and Kavakadze. This work had demonstrated similarities between images of the electrical functioning of the brain and certain discharges that occurred within the plasma preceding the appearance of some of its formations, including early-stage Polymorpha and geminate Solarids. He rejected overly anthropomorphic interpretations, all those mystical notions of the psychoanalytic, psychiatric, and neurophysiological schools, which sought to attribute to the neurogliac ocean particular human ailments such as epilepsy (the analogue of which were supposedly the convulsive eruptions of asymmetriads), because among the advocates of Contact he was one of the most cautious and clear-headed, and could not abide anything so much as the sensationalism which, admittedly very infrequently, accompanied one or another discovery. As it happened, a wave of exactly this kind of cheap interest was provoked by my doctoral dissertation. That was here too, though of course not in printed form—it was buried in one of the microfilm capsules. In it, taking as my starting point the innovative research of Bergmann and Reynolds, who from the mosaic of cortical processes had succeeded in identifying and

“filtering out” the components accompanying the most powerful emotions—despair, pain, joy—I went on to juxtapose those recordings with discharges emitted by currents in the ocean, and discovered oscillations and patterns in the curves (in certain parts of the symmetriads’ canopy, at the base of immature mimoids, and elsewhere) that offered a noteworthy analogy. This was enough for my name to appear soon afterwards in the gutter press beneath ludicrous headlines along the lines of “Despair of the Jelly” or “Planetary Orgasm.” But this worked out to my advantage (or so I thought till recently), since I came to the attention of Gibarian who, like any other solaricist, did not read every one of the thousands of papers being published, especially those written by novices. He wrote me a letter. That letter closed one chapter of my life, and opened up a new one.

After six days, the lack of any reaction whatsoever inclined us to repeat the experiment, at which the Station, which thus far had stayed in place at the intersection of the forty-third parallel and the one hundred and sixteenth meridian, moved off at an altitude of twelve hundred feet above the ocean towards the south, where, as the radar sensors and radiograms from the Satelloid were indicating, there had been significantly increased activity in the plasma.

For two days the bundle of X-rays modulated by my encephalogram pounded the almost completely smooth surface of the ocean at intervals of several hours.

Towards the end of the second day we found ourselves so close to the pole that when the disk of the blue sun had almost completely disappeared beyond the horizon, the crimson tinge of the clouds in the opposite direction heralded the rising of the red sun. The vast blackness of the ocean and the empty sky above it were then filled with a blindingly fierce clash between hard colors aglow like metal, glistening with poisonous green and subdued hollow flames of crimson, while the ocean itself was rent with the glare of two counterposed disks, two furious fires, one mercuric and one scarlet; at such moments it was enough for the tiniest cloud to be at the zenith for the rays falling across the diagonals of waves with their lumbering foam to be lit up with an incredible rainbow glitter. Immediately following the setting of the blue sun, on the north-west skyline, first heralded by the indicators, there appeared a symmetriad; it was fused almost indistinguishably with the red-stained mist and arose out of it only with isolated glinting reflections, like an immense glass flower growing from the meeting point of sky and plasma. The Station, however, maintained its course, and fifteen minutes or so later the colossus, red and trembling like a guttering lamp made of rubies, vanished again beyond the horizon. A few minutes later a tall thin pillar, whose base was hidden from our view by the curvature of the planet, shot up soundlessly several miles into the atmosphere. This clear indication of the end of the symmetriad we'd seen, one side fiery red, the other bright as a column of quicksilver, branched into a two-colored tree, then the extremities of its ever more spreading limbs merged into a single mushroom-shaped cloud whose upper portion set off in the fire of two suns on a distant journey driven by the wind, while the lower part fell extraordinarily slowly in ponderous clusterlike fragments spread across a good third of the horizon. An hour later the last trace of this spectacle had vanished.

Two more days passed. The experiment was repeated one final

time; the X-rays had by now penetrated a sizeable expanse of the plasmic ocean. To the south, from our altitude, despite the distance of a hundred and eighty miles, we now began to have an excellent view of the Arrhenides, a sixfold rocky chain of what looked like snow-capped peaks; these were in fact accumulations of organic matter, showing that this formation had once constituted the bed of the ocean.

At this point we shifted to a south-easterly course, moving for a time in parallel with the mountain barrier that was augmented with the clouds typical of the red day, till it too disappeared from view. By now ten days had passed since the first experiment.

The whole of that time, nothing really happened on the Station. Once Sartorius had completed the programming for the experiment, it was repeated automatically by the equipment; I'm not even sure whether anyone monitored it. Yet at the same time a great deal more than might have been desirable was happening on the Station. Not among the humans. I'd been concerned Sartorius would demand that work on the annihilator be started again; I was also waiting to see how Snaut would react when he learned from the other man that to a certain extent I had misled him, exaggerating the potential danger that could come from destroying neutrino-based matter. Yet nothing of the kind occurred, for reasons that initially were a complete mystery to me. Naturally I wondered too if this were some subterfuge, if they were concealing from me certain preparations and operations, so every day I checked out the windowless chamber beneath the deck of the main laboratory where the annihilator was kept. I never found anyone there, and the layer of dust on the casing and cables of the apparatus indicated that no one had so much as touched it for weeks.

During this time Snaut became as invisible as Sartorius, and more elusive, because now even the visuphone in the radio station went unanswered when it was called. Someone must have been steering the Station, but I couldn't say who it was, and I didn't care, strange as it may sound. The lack of response from the ocean had also left me indifferent to the point that after two or three days I'd stopped counting on it or worrying about it, and I forgot about the experiment completely. I spent entire days either in the library or in my cabin, with Harey drifting around me like a shadow. I could see that things were not good between us, and that this state of apathetic, mindless suspension couldn't go on forever. I needed to break through it somehow, change something in our relations, but I kept postponing even the idea of any change, incapable as I was of making a decision. I can't explain it any other way, but I had the feeling that everything on the Station, and especially what was between Harey and me, was presently in a frail, precarious equilibrium, and that moving it could bring everything to ruin. Why? I couldn't say. The strangest thing was

that she sensed something similar, to a degree in any case. When I think about it now, it seems to me that the impression of uncertainty, suspension, of the moment before an earthquake, was prompted by a presence that could not be sensed in any other way and yet which filled every deck and room on the Station. Though there was perhaps one other way it could be made out: through dreams. Never before and never afterwards have such apparitions appeared to me. I decided to write them down, and that's how I'm able to say anything at all about them; but these are only fragments devoid of almost all their terrifying richness. In circumstances that were essentially inexpressible, I seemed to find myself in places devoid of sky, earth, floors, ceilings, or walls, as if I were shrunk or imprisoned in a substance that was alien to me, as if my whole body had become part of some half-dead, unmoving, shapeless lump. Or, rather, that I myself was that lump, deprived of flesh, surrounded by at first indistinct pale pink patches suspended in a medium with different optical properties than air, such that it was only from very close up things became clear, even excessively and supernaturally so, because in those dreams of mine my immediate surroundings were more concrete and material than anything I experienced awake. Whenever I woke up I had the paradoxical feeling that the real waking life was in fact the other one, and that what I saw when I opened my eyes was nothing but its wizened shadow.

Such, then, was the first image, the beginning, from which the dream unfolded. Around me something would be waiting for permission, for my say-so, for an inner go-ahead, and I knew, or rather something inside of me knew, that I ought not to yield to this unaccountable impulse, because the more I silently promised, the more terrible the end would be. Though really I did not know this, because if I had I'd probably have been afraid, and I never felt any fear. I waited. From the pink mist enveloping me there emerged the first touch, while I, inert as a block of wood, enmired deep in whatever it was that seemed to have locked me in, was unable to retreat or even move, while that other thing examined my prison by touch, seeing and unseeing at the same time; and it already seemed to be a hand that was creating me; up till that moment I lacked even sight and now I could see—beneath the fingers that roamed about my face, out of nothingness there emerged my lips, cheeks, and as that touch, broken down into a thousand infinitely tiny parts, began to go further, I already had a face and a breathing torso, summoned to existence by this symmetrical act of creation; for I myself, being created, was creating in turn, and a face was coming into view that I had never seen before, foreign and familiar, I tried to look into its eyes, but I was unable to, because the proportions were constantly

being changed, there were no directions here, we were simply discovering one another in rapt silence and mutually becoming, and I was already my living self, though boundlessly enhanced, and that other being—a woman?—remained motionless with me. A pulse filled us and we were one, and then all at once the languor of this scene, beyond which nothing existed nor seemed able to, began to be infiltrated by something unutterably cruel, impossible, and unnatural. The same touch that had created us and had clung to our bodies with an invisible golden cloak began to pullulate. Our bodies, naked and white, started to flow, blackening into streams of writhing vermin that emerged out of us like air, and I was—we were—I was a glistening, febrile mass of wormlike motion, tangling and untangling, but never-ending, infinite, and in that boundlessness—no!—I who was the boundlessness, I howled in silence, asking to be extinguished, asking for an end, but it was exactly at this moment I would run off in every direction at once and gather back together in the form of a suffering that was more vivid than any waking state, multiplied a hundredfold, concentrated in black and red distances, now hardening into rock, now rising to a crescendo somewhere in the glow of another sun or another world.

This was the simplest of the dreams; the others I'm unable to recount, because the sources of terror pulsating within them had no counterpart in waking awareness. In them I knew nothing of the existence of Harey, but nor did I find in them any memories or experiences from the preceding day.

There were also other dreams in which, in darkness a congealed to the point of lifelessness, I felt myself to be the object of experiments being conducted slowly and painstakingly, without the use of any sensory implements; they involved being penetrated and taken to pieces and rubbed away into utter emptiness, and the underlying foundation of all these silent, destroying crucifixions was a fear the very recollection of which, in the daytime, made my heart race.

The days, undifferentiated and as if faded, filled with wearying ill will towards everything, inched by in extreme apathy; it was only the nights that I was afraid of, not knowing how I could save myself from them. I stayed awake with Harey, who had no need of sleep; I kissed her and caressed her, but I was aware that I wasn't doing it either for her or for myself, that it was all because I was frightened of sleep. Though I didn't say a word to her about my ghastly nightmares, she must have guessed something was up, because I sensed in her little deaths a consciousness of unrelenting humiliation, and there was nothing I could do about it. I mentioned before that the whole time I saw neither Snaut nor Sartorius. But Snaut would get in touch every few days, sometimes with a note, but more often by summoning me to

the telephone. He would ask if I hadn't seen anything new, any kind of change, something that could be interpreted as a reaction elicited by the so frequently repeated experiment. I would say no, and ask him the same question. Snaut would merely shake his head in the depths of the screen.

On the fifteenth day after the operation had been discontinued I woke earlier than usual, so exhausted by my bad dream that it felt like I was coming out of heavy sedation. Through the uncovered window, in the first light of the red sun, whose immense reflection sliced the smooth ocean in two with a river of crimson fire, I noticed how the surface, inert up till now, was imperceptibly becoming ruffled. It blackness initially grew paler, as if it had been covered by a fine layer of mist, but the mist itself had an entirely material consistency. Here and there points of turbulence appeared, till the vague movement spread to the entire expanse in sight. The blackness vanished, concealed beneath membranes that were bright pink where they bulged out and pearly brown in their hollow places. The colors, which alternated to begin with, decorating this strange covering of the ocean with long strips that seemed to freeze in place during the movement of the waves, then mingled together, and the entire ocean was coated by a foam of large bubbles that rose upwards in huge sheets both immediately beneath the Station and all around it. From every side at once, tissue-winged foam-clouds rose into the empty crimson sky; they extended horizontally, quite unlike real clouds, with thick bulbous edges. The ones whose horizontal streaks obscured the low disk of the sun were, in contrast to its glow, black as coal; others, in the vicinity of the sun, depending on the angle at which the rays from the east struck them, lit up cherry red or amaranthine purple, and this process went on as if the ocean were peeling in a series of bloody contour lines, every so often being blanketed with a new coating of hardened foam. Some of these formations floated up very close, right outside the windows, passing only a few feet away, and at a certain moment one of them brushed against the glass with its silky-looking surface, while the multitudes that had risen into the air first were barely visible by now, far up in the sky like scattered birds, dissolving at the zenith in a transparent precipitate.

The Station came to a stop, held in place, and remained so for about three hours; the spectacle did not cease. Towards the end, when the sun had sunk below the horizon and the ocean beneath us was concealed in darkness, the thousand fold throng of slender blushing silhouettes rose ever higher into the sky, drifting in endless ranks as if on invisible strings, still, weightless; and this magnificent ascension of what looked like ragged wings went on till it was completely swallowed up by the darkness.

The entire spectacle, shocking in its placid immensity, terrified Harey, yet I was unable to tell her anything about it, because for me as a solaricist it was just as new and unfathomable as for her. But shapes and formations as yet unlisted in any inventory could be observed two or three times a year on Solaris; with a little luck, even more often.

The next night, about an hour before the expected rise of the blue sun, we witnessed another phenomenon—the phosphorizing of the ocean. To begin with, on its surface shrouded in blackness there appeared isolated patches of light, or rather of a whiteish glow that was hazy and moved with the rhythm of the waves. The patches joined together and spread till the spectral glimmer had reached the horizon on all sides. The intensity of the light increased for a period of about fifteen minutes. Then the marvel ended in an astounding manner: the ocean began to be extinguished. From the west, across a front that must have been hundreds of miles wide a zone of darkness advanced; when it reached the Station and passed it the part of the ocean that was still phosphorescent could be seen as a radiance rising high into the shadows and moving further and further away to the east. Once it reached all the way to the horizon, it became like a vast polar dawn, then suddenly disappeared. When the sun rose soon afterwards the dead, empty expanse, barely marked with the wrinkles of waves sending mercuric glints at the windows of the Station, again extended in every direction. The phosphorescence of the ocean had already been described; in a certain percentage of cases it had been observed before the emergence of asymmetriads, in addition to which it was a rather characteristic indication of locally increased activity in the plasma. Yet for the next two weeks nothing happened either outside the Station or within it. Only once, in the middle of the night, I heard a distant shout that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once; it was remarkably high-pitched, piercing and prolonged, more of an inhumanly intensified wail. Torn from my nightmare, I lay there for a long while, listening intently, not entirely sure that the shout wasn't also a dream. The previous day, from the lab that was partially located above our cabin, there had come muffled sounds like heavy objects or equipment being moved around; I had the impression that the shout had also come from up there, though exactly how was unclear, since the two floors were separated by a soundproof ceiling. The dying voice went on almost half an hour. Drenched in perspiration, half mad, I was all set to race upstairs, such was the effect of the sound on my nerves. But in the end it fell silent, and once again only the moving of heavy objects could be heard.

Two days later, in the evening, as Harey and I were sitting in the small galley, Snaut suddenly appeared. He was wearing a suit, a real

terrestrial suit, which transformed him. He looked taller and older. Hardly glancing at us, he went up to the table, leaned over it and without sitting down began to eat cold meat straight from a can, accompanying it with mouthfuls of bread. As he ate he dipped his sleeve accidentally in the can and got grease on it.

“You’re dirtying your jacket,” I said.

“Hm?” he merely mumbled, his mouth full. He ate as if he hadn’t had anything for days. He poured himself half a cup of wine, drank it in one, wiped his mouth and, taking a breath, looked around through bloodshot eyes. He stared at me a moment and murmured:

“You’ve grown a beard? Well, well. . .”

Harey dropped the dishes into the sink with a clatter. Snaut began rocking lightly on his heels; he screwed his face up and smacked his lips loudly, cleaning his teeth with his tongue. I had the impression he was doing it deliberately.

“Can’t be bothered shaving, huh?” he asked, gazing at me obnoxiously. I didn’t respond.

“Be careful!” he exclaimed after a moment. “A word of advice: he stopped shaving to begin with as well.”

“Go get some sleep,” I murmured.

“What? You can’t fool me. Why should we not talk? Listen, Kelvin, maybe it wishes us well? Maybe it’s trying to make us happy, it just doesn’t yet know how? It reads our wishes from our brains, but only two percent of our nervous processes are conscious. So it knows us better than we know ourselves. So we should listen to it. Acquiesce. Don’t you think? You won’t? Why,” he said, his voice breaking tearfully, “why won’t you shave?”

“Give it a rest,” I snapped. “You’re drunk.”

“Drunk? Me? What of it? Can’t a guy that dragged all his crap from one end of the Galaxy to the other to find out how much he’s worth, can’t he get drunk? Why not? I guess you believe in humanity’s mission, eh, Kelvin? Gibarian told me about you, before he grew his beard. . . You’re exactly the way he described. . . Just don’t come up to the lab, or you’ll lose your faith. . . Sartorius is at work there, our Faust in reverse—looking for a cure for immortality, get it? He’s the last Knight of the Holy Contact, he’s all we deserve. . . His previous idea was pretty good too—endless death throes. Not bad, huh? *Agonia perpetua*. . . straws. . . straw hats. . . How can you not drink, Kelvin?”

His eyes, almost completely hidden beneath their swollen lids, came to rest on Harey, who was standing motionless by the wall.

“O white Aphrodite, born of the ocean. Afflicted with greatness, your hand . . . ,” he began to recite, and choked on his own laughter.

“Almost. . . word for word. . . eh, Kelvin?” he sputtered through his coughing.

I was still calm, but my calmness was beginning to harden into a cold rage.

“Stop it!” I hissed. “Stop it and leave!”

“You’re kicking me out? You too? You’re growing a beard, and you’re throwing me out? You don’t want me to warn you any more, to offer you advice, as one interstellar comrade to another? Kelvin, let’s open the lower hatches, we can shout to it down there, below, maybe it’ll hear us? But what’s its name? Think about it, we’ve named all the stars and the planets, but maybe they already had names? Such arrogance! Come on, let’s go down there. We can call out to it. . . tell it what it’s turned us into, it’ll be appalled. . . it’ll build us some silver symmetriads and pray for us in its own math, and throw bloody angels at us, and its suffering will be our suffering, its fear our fear, and it’ll beg us for an end. Because everything it is and everything it does is a plea for an end. Why are you not laughing? I’m just joking around. If we had more of a sense of humor as a race, things might not have gone this far. Do you know what he’s trying to do? He’s trying to punish it, this ocean, he’s trying to make it howl through every mountain. . . You don’t think he’ll have the courage to present his plan for the approval of that doddering old council of elders that sent us out here as redeemers of other people’s sins? You’re right, he’ll chicken out. . . but only because of the hat. The hat he won’t mention to anyone, he’s not that brave, our little Faust. . .”

I said nothing. Snaut was increasingly unsteady on his feet. Tears were rolling down his cheeks and dripping on his suit.

“Who did it? Which of us did it? Gibarian? Giese? Einstein? Plato? They were all criminals—you know? Think about it, in a rocket a person can burst like a bubble, or solidify completely, or boil, or explode in a fountain of blood so quickly he doesn’t have time to shout out, and then only his bones will be clattering against the metal, and they’ll go on circling in Newtonian orbit with an Einsteinian adjustment, our rattles of progress! And we’ll go willingly, because it’s a beautiful journey, till we arrive, and in these cabins, over this tableware, amid the immortal dishwashers, with our serried ranks of faithful lockers, our devoted toilets, here is our fulfillment. . . so you see, Kelvin—if I wasn’t drunk I’d not be talking like this, but someone finally ought to say it. Someone finally ought to! You’re sitting here, you child in the slaughterhouse, and your beard is growing. . . Whose fault is it? Answer that question yourself. . .”

He turned slowly and left the galley; on the threshold he grabbed hold of the door so as not to fall. Then the sound of his steps reached

us from the corridor. I was avoiding Harey's gaze, but at one moment our eyes met. I wanted to go up to her, put my arms around her, stroke her hair; but I couldn't. I couldn't.

The following three weeks were like the same day repeating itself, never changing; the window shades rose and fell, in the night I crawled from one nightmare to another, in the morning we got up and the game began again; though was it in fact a game? I pretended to be calm and so did Harey; this silent pact, the knowledge of our mutual deception, became our ultimate recourse. Because we talked a lot about how we were going to live on Earth, how we'd settle somewhere on the outskirts of a big city and never again leave the blue sky and green trees, and together we dreamed up the interior of our future home, and what our yard would look like, we even argued about details. . . the hedge, the bench. . . did I believe in it all even for a second? No. I knew it was impossible. I knew that. Because even if she were able to leave the Station—alive—still, it's only humans that can land on Earth, and humans are defined by their papers. The first control would put an end to that escape. They'd want to identify her, so first of all they'd separate us and that would give her away. The Station was the only place where we could live together. Did Harey know that? For sure. Had someone told her? In light of everything that happened, probably so.

One night, through my sleep I heard Harey quietly get up. I tried to pull her back. Only by being silent, only in the darkness could we still become free for a short while, only in brief periods of distraction that the despair besieging us on every side turned into merely a momentary suspension of the torment. I don't think she'd noticed that I was awake. Before I stretched out my hand she'd slipped out of bed. Still only half-conscious, I heard the sound of bare feet. I was overcome by a vague anxiety.

"Harey?" I whispered. I wanted to call out, but I didn't dare. I sat up in bed. The door to the corridor was ajar. A thin strip of light cut diagonally across the cabin. I thought I could hear muffled voices. She was talking with someone? Who?

I jumped out of bed, but I was overcome by such a terrible fear that my legs refused to obey me. I stood listening for a moment. Everything was quiet. I dragged myself back to the bunk. My head was pounding. I started counting. At one thousand I broke off; the door opened soundlessly, Harey crept into the cabin and paused, as if listening for my breathing. I tried to make it even. "Kris. . . ?" she whispered softly. I didn't respond. She got quickly into bed. I could feel her lying there stretched out, while I lay next to her, immobile, for I don't know how long. I tried to formulate questions, but the more time passed, the more I realized I wouldn't be the first one to break

the silence. After some time, an hour perhaps, I fell asleep.

The morning began the same as always. I cast suspicious glances at her only when she wasn't looking. After lunch we sat side by side in front of the bay window, where low ruddy clouds could be seen drifting past. The Station moved amongst them like a sailing ship. Harey was reading a book, while I was gazing in a manner that of late had become my only respite. I noticed that if I leaned my head a certain way I could see both of us reflected in the pane, the image transparent but clear. I took my hand off the arm of my chair. In the window I saw Harey, glancing to check I was staring at the ocean, lean over the arm and press her lips to the place I'd been touching a moment before. I remained seated, unnaturally stiff, while she bowed her head over her book again.

"Harey," I said softly, "where did you go in the night?"

"In the night?"

"Yes."

"You. . . you probably dreamed it, Kris. I didn't go anywhere."

"You didn't go anywhere?"

"No. You must have been dreaming it."

"Maybe," I said. "Yeah, it's possible I dreamed it. . ."

That evening, when we were already getting ready for bed, I started talking again about our voyage together, about our return to Earth.

"I don't want to listen to all that," she said. "Stop it, Kris. I mean, you know. . ."

"What?"

"No. Nothing."

When we were already in bed, she said she wanted a drink.

"There's a glass of juice on the table over there. Can you pass me it?"

She drank half and gave it to me. I wasn't thirsty.

"Drink to my health," she said with a smile. I finished the juice, which tasted a little salty to me, though I didn't give it a second thought.

"If you don't want to talk about Earth, what do you want to talk about?" I asked after she turned the light out.

"Would you get married if I wasn't in the picture?"

"No."

"Never?"

"Never."

"Why not?"

“I don’t know. I was on my own for ten years and I didn’t marry. Let’s not talk about that, darling. . .”

My head was buzzing as if I’d drunk a bottle of wine or more.

“No, let’s talk about it, let’s talk about that. What if I asked you to?”

“To get married? That’s nonsense, Harey. I don’t need anyone but you.”

She leaned over me. I felt her breath on my mouth; she took hold of me so firmly that for a brief second the overpowering drowsiness I was feeling was dispelled.

“Say it a different way.”

“I love you.”

Her forehead rested against my shoulder; I felt the tense flutter of her eyelashes and the wetness of tears.

“Harey, what is it?”

“Nothing. Nothing. Nothing,” she repeated ever more quietly. I strove to keep my eyes open, but they were closing of their own accord. I don’t know when I fell asleep.

I was woken by the red dawn. My head was leaden and my neck stiff, as if all the vertebrae had fused into a single bone. My tongue felt rough, repulsive, and I couldn’t move it in my mouth. I must have eaten something bad, I thought to myself, lifting my head with an effort. I reached out my hand to Harey. It encountered cold bedding.

I jerked upright.

The bed was empty, and no one was in the cabin. The sun was reflected in multiple red disks in the windows. I jumped to the floor. I must have looked comical, I staggered like a drunk. I held onto the furniture, grabbed hold of the locker. There was no one in the bathroom. Or the corridor. Or in the workshop either.

“Harey!!” I shouted, standing in the middle of the corridor and flailing my arms wildly. “Harey,” I croaked one more time. I already knew.

I don’t remember exactly what happened next. I must have run half-naked around the entire Station; I remember I even burst into the cold room, then the last depository, where I hammered on the closed door with my fists. I may even have been there more than once. The stairs echoed, I fell over, jumped up, hurtled off somewhere else, till I came to the transparent bulkhead beyond which was the hatch to the outside—a double reinforced door. I pushed against it with all my strength and shouted, wanting all this to be a dream. And someone had been with me for some time and was tugging at me, pulling me somewhere. Then I was in the small workshop, my shirt wet with icy

water, my hair bedraggled; my nostrils and tongue were stinging from surgical spirit, I was half-lying on something cold and metallic, and Snaut in his stained linen pants was bustling about by the medicine cabinet, tipping something over, the implements and glassware making a fearful clatter.

All at once I saw him in front of me; he was staring into my eyes, hunched over and intent.

“Where is she?”

“She’s gone.”

“But, but Harey. . .”

“Harey’s gone,” he said slowly and distinctly, bringing his face close to mine as if he’d delivered a blow and was now observing its effect on me.

“She’ll come back,” I whispered, closing my eyes. And for the first time I was truly not afraid of it. I’d lost my fear of her ghostly return. I couldn’t understand how I’d once been so frightened of it!

“Drink this.”

He handed me a glass of warm liquid. I looked at it, then all of a sudden flung the contents in his face. He took a step back, wiping his eyes. When he opened them again I was standing over him. He was tiny.

“It was you?!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t lie, you know what I mean. It was you talking with her the other night? You made her give me a sleeping draft for the. . . ? What have you done with her? Tell me!!”

He felt in his breast pockets and took out a crumpled envelope. I snatched it from him. It was sealed. There was nothing written on the outside. I tore it open. A sheet of paper folded in four fell out. Large, rather childlike handwriting in uneven lines. I recognized whose it was.

Darling, it was me who asked him to do it. He’s a good man. It’s awful that I had to deceive you, but there was no other way. I ask one thing of you—listen to him and don’t hurt yourself. You were wonderful.

At the bottom there was one word that had been crossed out. I managed to make it out: she’d written “Harey,” then erased it; there was one other letter, that looked like an H or a K, which had been turned into a blot. I read it again, and one more time. Then yet again. By now my head had cleared too much for me to get hysterical; I couldn’t even manage a groan, I could barely speak.

“How?” I whispered. “How?”

“Later, Kelvin. Keep it together.”

“I am. Tell me. How?”

“The annihilator.”

“What do you mean? What about the apparatus?” I asked with a start.

“The Roche machine was no use. Sartorius built another special destabilizer. A small one. It only operates over a range of a few yards.”

“What happened to her. . . ?”

“She disappeared. There was a flash and a puff of wind. A faint puff. Nothing more.”

“Over a short range, you say?”

“Right. We didn’t have the materials for anything bigger.”

Suddenly the walls began to lean in on me. I closed my eyes.

“Lord. . . she. . . but she’ll come back. . .”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“No, Kelvin. You remember the rising foam? Since that time they haven’t come back any more.”

“They haven’t?”

“No.”

“You killed her,” I said quietly.

“Yes. Would you not have done so? In my place?”

I jumped to my feet and set off walking faster and faster. From the wall to the corner and back again. Nine paces. Turn. Nine paces.

I came to a halt in front of him.

“Listen, we’ll submit a report. We’ll demand direct communication with the Board. It can be done. They’ll agree. They have to. The planet’ll be excluded from the Convention of the Four. All means will be permissible. We’ll bring in antimatter generators. You think anything can resist antimatter? Nothing can! Nothing! Nothing!” I was shouting exultantly, blinded by tears.

“You want to destroy it?” he said. “What for?”

“Go away. Leave me alone!”

“I’m not going.”

“Snaut!”

He looked into my eyes. “No,” he said with a shake of the head.

“What do you want? What do you want from me?”

He retreated to the table.

“All right. We’ll submit a report.”

I turned around and began pacing again.

“Sit down.”

“Get off my back.”

“There are two matters. The first are the facts. The second are our demands.”

“You want to talk about that now?”

“Yes, now.”

“I won’t. Understand? I don’t care about any of that.”

“The last communique we sent was before Gibarian died. That was over two months ago. We need to establish the exact sequence of events surrounding the appearance of—”

“Will you not stop?” I grabbed his arm.

“You can beat me if you want,” he said, “I’m still going to talk.”

I let go of him.

“Do whatever you want.”

“The point is, Sartorius will try and conceal certain facts. I’m almost certain of it.”

“And you won’t?”

“No. Not any more. This isn’t just about us. It’s about—you know what it’s about. It demonstrated rational activity. A capacity for organic synthesis of the highest order, something quite unknown to us. It knows the composition, the microstructure, the metabolism of our bodies. . .”

“Fine,” I said. “Why stop there? It performed a series of. . . experiments on us. A mental vivisection. Based on knowledge stolen from our heads, and paying no attention to our own purposes.”

“Those aren’t facts, they’re not even inferences, Kelvin. They’re hypotheses. In a certain sense it did pay attention to what was desired by a closed, hidden part of our minds. These could have been—gifts. . .”

“Gifts! Dear God!”

I burst out laughing.

“Stop it!” he exclaimed, gripping my hand. I squeezed his fingers, pressing harder and harder till his knuckles crunched. He was looking at me through narrowed eyes, without wavering. I let go of him and moved off into the corner. Standing with my face to the wall, I said:

“I’ll try not to be too hysterical.”

“Never mind all that. What are we going to ask for?”

“You decide. I can’t, not right now. Did she say anything before. . . ?”

“No. Nothing. As for me, I believe an opportunity has arisen.”

“An opportunity? What opportunity? For what? Oh,” I said more quietly, looking him in the eye, because I’d suddenly gotten it. “Contact? We’re back with Contact? Haven’t we had too much already. . . you also, you yourself, and this whole madhouse. . . Contact? No no no. Count me out.”

“Why?” he asked, completely calm. “Kelvin, you keep insisting on treating it as a person, now more than ever. You hate it.”

“And you don’t?” I snapped.

“No. Kelvin, come on, it’s blind. . .”

“Blind?” I repeated, unsure whether I’d heard right.

“Of course, in our understanding of the word. We don’t exist for it the way we do for each other. The surface of the face, of the body, which we see, means we encounter one another as individuals. For it, this is only a transparent screen. After all, it penetrated the inside of our brains.”

“All right. But what of it? What are you getting at? If it was able to create a person who didn’t exist outside of my memory, bring her to life, and in such a way that her eyes, her movements, her voice. . . her voice. . .”

“Keep talking! Keep talking, man!!”

“I am talking. . . I am. . . Yes. So then. . . her voice. . . This means it can read us like a book. You know what I’m saying?”

“Yes. That if it wanted to, it could communicate with us?”

“Of course. Is that not obvious?”

“No. Not in the slightest. It could simply have taken a procedure that didn’t consist of words. As a fixed memory trace it’s a protein structure. Like the head of a spermatozoon, or an ovum. After all, in the brain there aren’t any words, feelings, the recollection of a person is an image written in the language of nucleic acids on megamolecular asynchronous crystals. So it took what was most clearly etched in us, most locked away, fullest, most deeply imprinted, you know? But it had no need whatsoever to know what the thing was to us, what meaning it held. Just as if we were able to create a symmetriad and toss it into the ocean, knowing the architecture and the technology and structural materials, but with no understanding of what it’s for, what it means to the ocean. . .”

“Quite possibly,” I said. “Yes, that’s possible. In such a case it had no. . . perhaps it had no intention of trampling on us and crushing us the way it did. Perhaps. And it only unintentionally. . .”

My lips began to tremble.

“Kelvin!”

“I know, I know. It’s fine. It’s nothing. You’re a good man. It’s

good too. Everyone's good. But what for? Explain it to me. What for? Why did it do it? What did you tell her?"

"The truth."

"The truth, the truth! But what?"

"You know. Come to my room now. We can write the report. Come on."

"Wait a moment. What are you really after? Surely you're not planning to remain on the Station. . . ?"

"I want to stay here. Yes."

I was sitting by the big window and staring at the ocean. I had nothing to do. The report, which had taken five days to write, was now a bundle of waves speeding across the void somewhere beyond the constellation of Orion. When it reached the dark dusty nebula that extends across eight trillion cubic miles and swallows every signal and light ray, it would hit the first of a series of relays. From there, from one radio beacon to the next, in leaps of billions of miles it would hurtle in a vast arc all the way to the last relay, a metal container packed tight with precision instruments and equipped with the extended muzzle of a directional antenna, which would compress it one more time and fling it further into space, toward Earth. Months would pass and an identical packet of energy, trailing a wake of shockwave distortions through the gravitational field of the Galaxy, would be shot from Earth, would reach the edge of the cosmic cloud, squeeze through it, fortified by the series of slowly drifting beacons, and with undiminished rapidity would speed on toward the double suns of Solaris.

Beneath the red sun the ocean was blacker than ever. A ruddy mist melted the place where it met the sky; the day was exceptionally hot, as if presaging one of those extremely rare and unimaginably violent storms that strike the planet a few times a year. There are reasons to believe that its only inhabitant controls the climate and itself causes the storms.

For several more months I would be gazing from those windows, observing from high up the sunrises of white gold and oppressive red, mirrored from time to time in some fluid eruption, in the silvery bauble of a symmetriad; following the journey made by slender rapidos leaning into the wind; encountering half-degraded, crumbling mimoids. One day the screens of all the visuphones would start to flicker, the entire electronic signalization system, long dormant, would spring to life, set in motion by an impulse sent from hundreds of thousands of miles away announcing the approach of a metal colossus that would lower itself over the ocean with a prolonged thunder of its gravitors. It would be either the Ulysses or the Prometheus, or another of the great long-distance cruisers. When I climbed the accommodation ladder from the flat roof of the Station, on board I'd see ranks of bulky white-armored automats that do not share mankind's original sin and are so innocent they carry out any command, to the point of destroying themselves or any object lying in their path, if their memory, oscillating in crystal, is so programmed. And then the ship would move off, noiselessly, faster than sound,

leaving behind it a cone of reverberations splitting into bass octaves as it reached the ocean, and the faces of all the humans would brighten for a moment at the thought that they were returning home.

But I had no home. Earth? I thought about its great crowded buzzing cities, in which I would become lost, almost effaced, as if I'd gone through with what I wanted to do that second or third night—thrown myself into the ocean where it rocked sluggishly in the darkness. I'd drown in people. I'd be a reticent, observant, and therefore valued, companion, I'd have many acquaintances, friends even, and women, maybe even one woman. For some time I'd have to force myself to smile, say hello, get to my feet, perform a thousand trivial actions from which life on Earth is composed, till I stopped being aware of them. I'd find new interests, new pastimes, but I wouldn't give myself over to them completely. Not to anything or anyone, ever again. And, maybe, I'd stare into the night towards the place where the darkness of the dusty nebula blocks the light of two suns like a black veil; I'd remember everything, even what I was thinking now, and with an indulgent smile in which there was a hint of regret, but also of superiority, I'd recall my follies and my hopes. I absolutely did not regard that "me" of the future as anything worse than the Kelvin who was prepared to do anything in the cause of so-called Contact. And no one would ever have the right to judge me.

Snaut came into the cabin. He looked around, then stared at me. I got up and went up to the table.

"Did you want something?"

"Am I right in thinking you don't have anything to do. . . ?" he asked, blinking. "I could give you, there are some calculations that need running, not that they're urgent or anything. . ."

"Thanks," I said with a smile, "but that's not necessary."

"Are you sure?" he asked, looking out of the window.

"Yes. I've been thinking about various things and—"

"I'd rather you didn't think so much."

"Then you have no idea what this is about. Tell me, do you. . . believe in God?"

He gave me a sharp look.

"Come off it. Who still believes these days. . ."

Unease flickered in his eyes.

"It's not so straightforward," I said in a deliberately light tone. "I don't mean the traditional God of terrestrial beliefs. I'm no specialist in religion, and I may not have come up with anything new, but do you happen to know if there ever existed a faith in. . . a defective God?"

“Defective?” he repeated, raising his eyebrows. “How do you mean? In a certain sense the god of every religion was defective, because he was encumbered with human qualities, only magnified. The God of the Old Testament, for instance, was a hothead who craved servility and was jealous of other gods. . . the Greek gods had just as many human imperfections, with their quarrelsomeness and their family squabbles—”

“No,” I interrupted him, “I mean a God whose deficiencies don’t arise from the simplemindedness of his human creators, but constitute his most essential, immanent character. This would be a God limited in his omniscience and omnipotence, one who can make mistakes in foreseeing the future of his works, who can find himself horrified by the course of events he has set in motion. This is. . . a cripple God, who always desires more than he’s able to have, and doesn’t always realize this to begin with. Who has built clocks, but not the time that they measure. Has built systems or mechanisms that serve particular purposes, but they too have outgrown these purposes and betrayed them. And has created an infinity that, from being the measure of the power he was supposed to have, turned into the measure of his boundless failure.”

“Once there was Manicheism,” Snaut began hesitantly. The guarded reserve with which he’d been treating me in recent days had disappeared.

“But this has nothing to do with good and evil,” I interrupted him at once. “This God doesn’t exist outside of matter, he’s unable to free himself of it, and that’s all he wants. . .”

“I don’t know any religion like that,” he said after a moment of silence. “Such a religion was never. . . necessary. If I understand you correctly, and I’m afraid I do, then you’re thinking about an evolving god who develops through time and grows, mounting higher and higher levels of power toward the awareness of that power’s impotence? This God of yours is a being who has entered godhood like entering a blind alley, and when he comprehends this, he yields to despair. Fine, but surely a despairing God is a human being, my friend? You’re thinking about human beings. . . This isn’t just poor philosophy, it’s even poor mysticism.”

“No,” I insisted, “I’m not thinking about human beings. Perhaps in certain features that might match the provisional definition, but only because it’s full of holes. A human being, appearances to the contrary, doesn’t create his own purposes. These are imposed by the time he’s born into; he may serve them, he may rebel against them, but the object of his service or rebellion comes from the outside. To experience complete freedom in seeking his purposes he would have

to be alone, and that's impossible, since a person who isn't brought up among people cannot become a person. My. . . one has to be a being devoid of plurality, you follow?"

"Oh," he said, "right away I should've. . ."

And he pointed out the window.

"No," I disagreed, "not that either. At the most as something that in its growth missed an opportunity for godhood, having retreated too soon into itself. It's more of an anchorite, the hermit of the universe, not its god. . . It repeats itself, Snaut, whereas the one I'm thinking about would never do that. Maybe he's coming into existence as we speak, in some corner of the Galaxy, and before long, in a fit of youthful intoxication he'll start extinguishing some stars and lighting others, after a certain time we'll notice it. . ."

"We already have," said Snaut sourly. "Novas and supernovas. . . are they candles on his altar, according to you?"

"If you want to treat what I'm saying so literally. . ."

"Perhaps Solaris is precisely the cradle of this divine infant of yours," added Snaut. An ever more distinct smile was ringing his eyes with little creases. "Perhaps in your conception this is the origin, the seed of the God of despair, perhaps its exuberant childhood is way beyond our comprehension, and everything our libraries of solariana contain is merely a catalogue of his infant reflexes. . ."

"And for a while we were his playthings," I finished. "Yes, that's possible. You know what we just managed to do? Create an entirely new hypothesis on the subject of Solaris, and that's no small achievement! Right away you have an explanation of the failure to make Contact, the lack of response, certain, let's say, extravagances in its treatment of us: the mind of a small child. . ."

"I don't need to put my name to it," he murmured as he stood by the window. For a long moment we gazed at the black waves. On the eastern horizon a pale elongated smudge could be seen through the mist.

"Where did you get that idea of a defective God?" he asked suddenly, not taking his eyes off the emptiness bathed in light.

"I don't know. It seemed to me very, very authentic, you know? It would be the only God I'd be inclined to believe in, one whose suffering wasn't redemption, didn't save anyone, didn't serve any purpose, it just *was*."

"A mimoid," Snaut said ever so quietly, in a different voice.

"What was that? Oh, right. I noticed it before. It's really old."

We both gazed at the misty red horizon.

"I'm going to go fly there," I said unexpectedly. "All the more

because I've been on the Station the whole time; this is a good opportunity. I'll be back in half an hour. . ."

"What did you say?" Snaut opened his eyes wide. "You're going out there? Where to?"

"There." I pointed at the indistinct flesh-colored shape looming in the mist. "What harm could it do? I'll take the small helicopter. It'd be ridiculous if, one day on Earth, I had to admit that I'm a solaricist who's never set foot on the planet. . ."

I went up to the locker and started picking out a set of overalls. Snaut watched me in silence then eventually said:

"I don't like this."

"What?" I turned around with the overalls in my hand. I was overcome by an excitement I hadn't experienced in a long while. "What's the problem? Come on, cards on the table! You're afraid that I'll. . . that's absurd! I give you my word I wouldn't. It hadn't even occurred to me. No, really no."

"I'll go with you."

"Thanks, but I'd rather be on my own. After all, it's something new, something completely new." I was speaking quickly as I pulled on the overalls. Snaut went on talking but I didn't really listen as I hunted for what I'd need.

He went with me to the docking bay. He helped me wheel out the helicopter from its hangar into the middle of the launch pad. As I was putting on my space suit he suddenly asked:

"Does a man's word still carry any value with you?"

"For God's sake, Snaut, are you still on about that? It does. I already gave you it. Where are the backup canisters?"

He didn't say any more. When I'd closed the transparent cockpit cover I signaled to him. He turned on the lift and I slowly rose to the roof of the Station. The engine sprang to life with a lengthy growl, the three-bladed rotor started spinning and the craft rose up, oddly light, leaving behind it the ever shrinking silver disk of the Station.

It was my first time alone over the ocean. The effect was completely different than what one experiences watching through the windows. This may also have been because of the low altitude—I had dropped to less than three hundred feet above the surface. It was only now that I not only knew but actually felt how the alternating crests and troughs of the vast expanse, with their oily glisten, moved not like a marine tide or a cloud, but like an animal. Constant though extremely slow contractions of a muscular naked torso—that was what it looked like. The top of each wave flamed with red foam as it turned over lazily; when I altered course to head directly toward the slowly

drifting island of the mimoid, the sun hit me in the eyes; there was a flicker of bloody lightning in the convex windshield, while the ocean itself turned inky blue with spots of dark fire.

The arc that I described somewhat unskillfully brought me far to windward, the mimoid left behind as a broad bright patch whose irregular outline stood out against the ocean. It had lost the pink hue the mist had given it; it was yellow as dry bone. For a moment I lost sight of it, and instead I caught a glimpse of the Station in the distance where it seemed to hang suspended right over the ocean like a huge Zeppelin from the old days. I repeated the maneuver, concentrating intently: the solid mass of the mimoid with its grotesque vertiginous shape hove into view. I suddenly worried that I'd clip the topmost of its bulbous ledges, and I brought the helicopter up so abruptly that it juddered as it lost speed. My caution was unnecessary, as the rounded summits of the bizarre towers sailed by far below me. I guided the craft alongside the drifting island and slowly, foot by foot, I began to reduce altitude till the crumbling peaks rose above the cockpit. It wasn't big. From one end to the other it measured perhaps three quarters of a mile, and no more than a few hundred yards across; there were some narrower places where it was likely to break up before long. It must have been a fragment from an incomparably larger formation; by Solaris' standards it was a mere splinter, a remnant, God knows how many weeks or months old.

In amongst the stringy protuberances, right next to the ocean I discovered a sort of shore, a few dozen square yards of rather steep but smooth surface, and I directed the helicopter there. Landing proved harder than I'd thought: I came very close to catching the rotor on a wall that suddenly rose up before my eyes, but I nailed it. I turned the engine off at once and flipped up the cockpit cover. Standing on the wing, I made sure the helicopter wasn't in danger of slipping into the ocean; the waves were licking at the jagged edge only a dozen or so yards from where I'd touched down, but the craft stood firmly on its broad landing skids. I jumped onto the. . . "earth." What I'd taken before for a wall, the thing I almost crashed into, was a huge osseous sheet, thin as a membrane and honeycombed with holes, that stood vertical and was covered with swellings that resembled balustrades. A gap several yards wide cut across this whole multi-story surface diagonally and, like the large and irregularly placed holes, showed what lay beyond. I climbed up the incline of the closest span of the wall, discovering that the boots of the space suit had an excellent grip, while the suit itself did not hinder my movements. Finding myself four stories above the ocean, I turned to face the interior of the skeletal landscape; it was only now that I could get a proper look at it.

The similarity to an ancient city half in ruins, to an exotic Moroccan settlement from centuries ago that had been brought down by earthquake or other natural disaster, was astounding. I could see with the greatest clarity the twisting labyrinth of streets partially blocked by rubble: their steep winding descent toward a shore washed by clammy foam; higher up, the still intact battlements and bastions, their rounded foundations; and, in the bulging or concave walls, the dark openings like broken windows or defensive slits. The whole island-city, leaning heavily to one side like a sunken galleon, proceeded in senseless motion, turning very slowly, as could be seen from the apparent movement of the sun in the sky, which produced a lazy play of shadow across the inner reaches of the ruins; at times a ray of sunlight would slip through to reach the spot where I was standing. I climbed higher still, at considerable risk, till a fine powder began to crumble from the excrescences protruding over my head; as it floated down it filled the crooked gullies and alleyways with great billows of dust. A mimoid is of course not actual rock, and its resemblance to limestone ends when you take a piece in your hand—it's a lot lighter than pumice, small-celled, and hence extraordinarily airy.

I was so high up now I could feel its movement; it wasn't just floating forward, driven by the blows of the ocean's black muscles, who knows where from or where to, but it was also tilting first one way then the other, exceptionally slowly. Each of these pendulum-like swings was accompanied by the drawn-out, glutinous sounds of yellow and gray foam dripping from the shore as it rose away from the ocean. This rocking motion had been given it long ago, probably when it was born, and it retained it thanks to its huge mass. Having observed as much as I could from my elevated vantage point, I climbed carefully back down; it was only then, strange to relate, that I realized the mimoid did not interest me in the slightest, that I had come here to encounter not it, but the ocean.

I sat down on the rough, cracked surface, a few yards from the helicopter. A black wave crawled sluggishly up onto the shore, spreading and at the same time losing its color; when it retreated, the edge of the previously untouched rock was marked with trembling filaments of slime. I moved further down and reached out my hand to the next wave. It faithfully repeated the phenomenon that humans had first witnessed almost a century before: it hesitated, withdrew, then flowed over my hand yet without touching it, in such a way that a narrow layer of air remained between the surface of my gauntlet and the inside of the covering, which instantly changed consistency, turning from liquid to almost fleshy. I then raised my arm; the wave, or rather its narrow tongue, followed it upwards, continuing to encase

my hand in an ever more transparent dirty green encystment. I rose to my feet, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to lift my arm any further. A shaft of the gelatinous substance stretched like a vibrating violin string, but did not break off; the base of the entirely flattened wave, like a strange creature waiting patiently for the end of these experiments, clung to the shore around my feet (also without coming into contact with them). It looked as if a ductile flower had grown out of the ocean, its calyx encircling my fingers in such a way that it became their exact negative, though without touching them. I stepped back. The stem of the flower shuddered and, as if reluctantly, it returned toward the ground -- elastic, swaying, unsure. The wave gathered, drawing it into itself, and disappeared from the edge of the shore. I repeated the game until at some point—like a hundred years ago—one of the waves receded indifferently, as if having had enough of the new experience, and I knew that I'd have had to wait several hours to revive its "curiosity." I took my seat as before, but as if changed by this theoretically familiar phenomenon that I had provoked; theory was quite incapable of conveying the actual experience.

In the budding, growth, and spread of this living formation, in each of its movements separately and in all taken together, there was something one was tempted to call a cautious yet not timid naivety, as it strove frantically and rapidly to know, to take in, an unexpectedly encountered new shape. Then, in mid-journey, it had to withdraw when it was in danger of transgressing certain boundaries established by a mysterious law. This agile inquisitiveness was so utterly at odds with the immensity that stretched to every bright horizon. I had never before been so aware of its vast presence, its powerful, inexorable silence breathing evenly through its waves. Staring in wonderment, I was descending to regions of inertia that might have seemed inaccessible, and in the gathering intensity of engrossment I was becoming one with this fluid unseeing colossus, as if—without the slightest effort, without words, without a single thought—I was forgiving it for everything.

For the whole of the final week I behaved so sensibly that the distrustful glint in Snaut's eye eventually stopped harassing me. On the outside I was calm; secretly, without being fully conscious of it, I was expecting something. What? Her return? How could I? Each of us is aware he's a material being, subject to the laws of physiology and physics, and that the strength of all our emotions combined cannot counteract those laws; it can only hate them. The eternal belief of lovers and poets in the power of love, which is more enduring than death, the *finis vitae sed non amoris* that has pursued us through the centuries, is a lie. But this lie is not ridiculous, it's simply futile. To be

a clock, on the other hand, measuring the passage of time, one that is smashed and rebuilt over and over again, one in whose mechanism despair and love are set in motion by the watchmaker along with the first movements of the cogs; to know one is a repeater of suffering felt ever more deeply as it becomes increasingly comical through multiple repetitions? To replay human existence—fine, but to replay it in the way a drunk replays a corny tune, pushing coins over and over into the jukebox? I didn't believe for a minute that this liquid colossus, which had brought about the death of hundreds of humans within itself, with which my entire race had for decades been trying in vain to establish at least a thread of communication—that this ocean, lifting me up unwittingly like a speck of dust, could be moved by the tragedy of two human beings. But its actions were geared towards some purpose. True, even this I was not completely certain of. Yet to leave meant to strike out that perhaps slim, perhaps only imagined chance concealed in the future. And thus years amid furniture, objects, that we had both touched, in air that still remembered her breathing? In the name of what? The hope of her return? I had no hope. Yet expectation lived on in me—the last thing she had left behind. What further consummations, mockeries, torments did I still anticipate? I had no idea, as I abided in the unshaken belief that the time of cruel wonders was not yet over.

Zakopane, June 1959 - June 1960

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